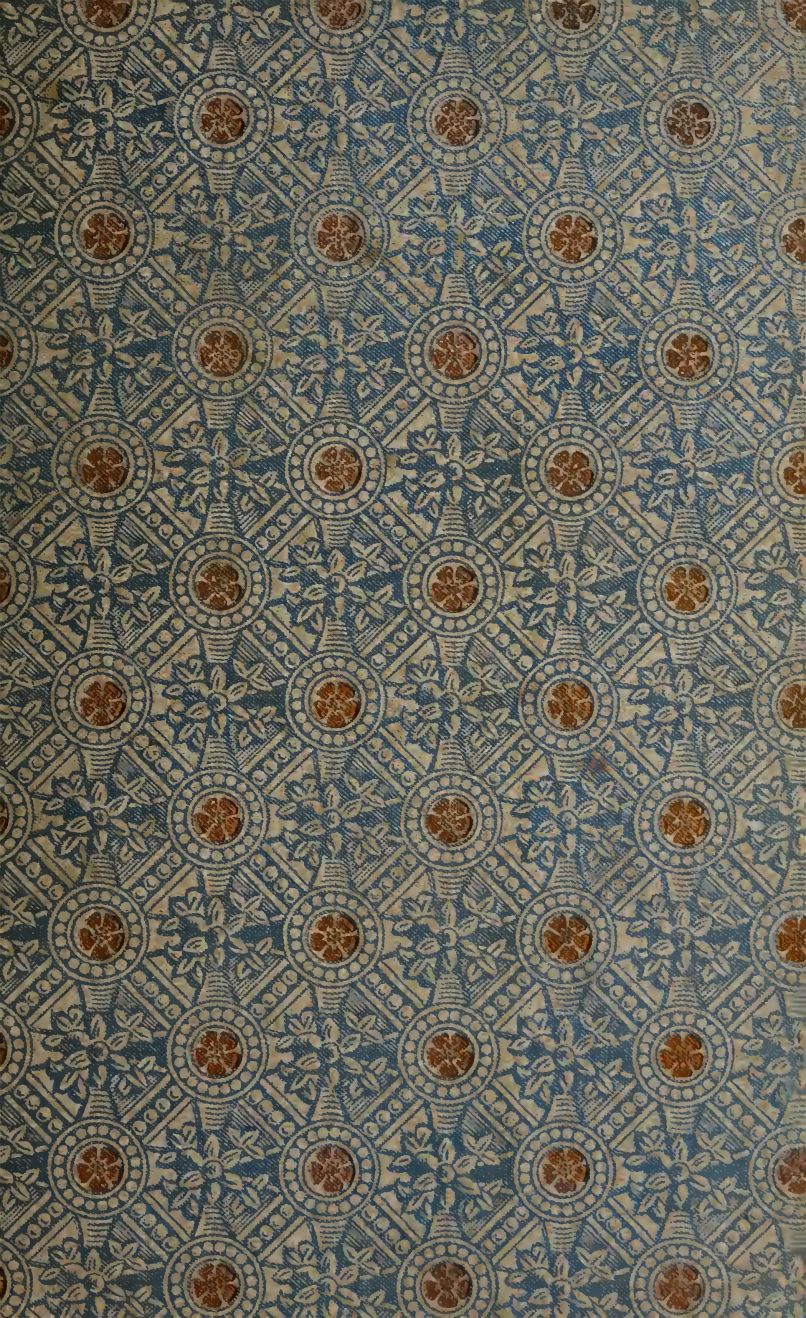

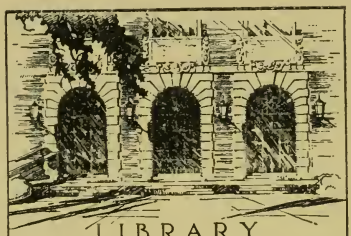

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THE TRANSGRESSION OF TERENCE CLANCY.

The Transgression of Terence Clancy.

BY

Harold Vallings,

Author of "The Quality of Mercy," etc.

"Good thoughts (though God accept them) yet towards men are little better than good dreams, except they be put in act."— BACON.

In Three Volumes.

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THE TRANSGRESSION OF TERENCE CLANCY.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN Simon found himself, after some hours of fierce striding over the moor, at the door of that familiar workshop, his observatory, the first outrush of rage and despair had passed over; he had reached the stage when the mental faculties begin to clear, to measure the dimensions, and test the weight, of what at first seemed a huge formless bulk of trouble filling up the universe. He had got far enough away from the ugly thing to be able to realize its shape and size,

to become aware that the world had not ceased to revolve, although the main hinge of his own life had given way; that he was not even a man especially selected by Fate for the heaviest burden it could impose, but merely one on whom the most natural and ordinary of all disappointments had befallen. His logical habit had begun to assert itself, though his heart was full of wrath and bitterness.

On his workshop table he found a letter, sent off by Nell in the morning, awaiting him in company with several others, for, when proposing to spend the whole evening at Moor Gates, he generally arranged to have his second-post letters awaiting him at the observatory.

This letter was, in substance, the one which Nell had written and torn up several times lately; its perusal was to Simon like the feel of cold iron.

True, he was by this time beginning to

realize how his own blindness had contributed to the disaster; to admit frankly that his fatuous throwing of Clancy into such close relation with Nell was the achievement of an unthinking fool; even to force upon his own recollection the frankly spoken diffidence with which she had first accepted him. But there remained the bitter fact that all the affection he had lavished upon her had warmed her heart no whit, that her letter was nothing but a prisoner's cry for liberty, that the very kindness and sympathy which she lavished upon the world at large were denied to himself. He felt that he had deserved something better than this cutting note from Nell, and could as yet make no allowance for her distracted condition. Some day, perhaps, he might make a different summing up of the matter as between Nell and himself; at present he could only encourage the demon of jealousy to enter his mind and take full possession.

Against Terence Clancy he felt a resentment that grew deeper as thought added itself to thought. For months he had been concerning himself about this man's prospects, seeking opportunities for him, making friends for him; had raised him from drudging poverty to something like affluence, had been to him a friend and a brother—and Terence had requited his benefactor with this ignoble treachery.

Henceforward Simon resolved to be a cynic of the cynics; he felt that his attitude towards human nature would pass from one extreme to the other, that he was now hovering between his old fatuous optimism and an acrid pessimism which time would justify and encourage. If Terence, whom he had always thought so frank and honest, so warm-natured and guileless, so incapable of the least meanness—if Terence Clancy, his own familiar friend whom he loved, could practise such subtle perfidy as this, what

must be looked for from the general ruck of those around him? "In whatsoever direction I turn," thought Simon, in his wrath and gloom, "some like discovery will await me; I will trust and believe in no man in future, not a soul, but accept the simple truth that self-interest is man's only motive and care."

So he went on brooding by the dim light of his turned-down lamp, while all the morbid fibres of his character, silent hitherto for want of the touch of Misfortune's finger, awoke and made mournful music. He was entering upon a new quest, bent upon an eager search for human depravity, schooling himself to expect it of every one, resolved to delve it up and feast his eyes upon it everywhere.

When he had sufficiently hugged to himself his new discoveries, and darkened his heart as much as his mood required, he glanced through the rest of his correspondence.

One note furnished him with just the kind of news for which he now felt himself to be craving. It was a hurried scrawl from Frank Nelson, the vicar, and regretfully informed Simon that his agent, Jackson—"Fat Jackson," as he was generally called in Chillington—was believed to have absconded.

Friends and acquaintances had ofttimes warned Simon against this agent, a plump, bald-headed little man, full of geniality, and of a waggish good nature which cloaked the cunning of a serpent; but Simon, thanks to his trick of wilful unsuspicion, had continued not only to employ this acute rogue, but to throw plenty of temptation in his way. Jackson had been managing director of all my Lord Timon's charitable schemes, waxing fatter and more genial on the toll that he had managed to extract from every one. It now appeared from the vicar's note that a large sum appertaining to the new Working Men's Club, which, thanks to a lack of the

most ordinary business precautions on Simon's part, had been placed in Jackson's hands, was now missing. In fact, the genial little man, flushed with the success of previous minor peculations, had appropriated the whole, travelled up to London first-class without troubling to leave an address behind him, and was now doubtless spending the money like a lord.

Simon laughed harshly at this news, for the discovery of another scoundrel in a man whom he had trusted fitted in with his savage mood to a nicety. "They warned me against him," he muttered, "but the result would have been the same whomsoever I had trusted. One man is just like another; apply the acid of temptation, and every one is found to be of the same base metal. He laughed again more harshly as he thrust the letters into his pocket and marched off down the hill, pitying his own simplicity in having taken so many years to make this common-

place discovery. "Too much star-gazing has blinded me," thought he; "none but an astronomer could have hugged his folly so long."

As he strode down the long spur which divides the upper combe into two heads, the square mass of the Hall loomed vaguely up from the white mists of the low ground. Catching sight of it, he paused suddenly, and allowed the waves of bitterness to immerse him for a moment. This place was to have been their home—Nell's and his. In a few weeks he was to have brought hither his sweet bride, who was to reconcile his father to him, to pass through life always at his side—the honoured, the beloved, the peacemaker, the idolized wife, the tender mother of his children. And she, too, had succumbed to the most ordinary temptation; even she, his affianced bride, was not to be trusted for an hour; his jealous eyes should always have been upon her, he should never

have allowed even his most trusted friend so much as to touch her hand.

In this his dark hour a great longing towards his father took possession of Simon ; he felt a strong outrush of the heart towards the old man who would now surely cease to be a stranger to his only son. A hope sprang up in Simon's sore heart that the ice of estrangement might now at the eleventh hour be broken ; that he might yet, before the old eyes closed in death, see in them the affection for which he had never ceased to look. There had been faults on his side, too ; his pride had helped to estrange his father, he had exacted too much, had allowed too little for an invalid's weakness and irritability—and all this he would freely confess.

From where he stood, Simon could see that a light was burning in the library, and knew that the old man must be sitting up reading, as he would often do, now that sleep had become more difficult. The gazer's

heart was uplifted by this opportunity, a fresh spring of hope welled up as he thought how he would go in to the old man, and lay bare his trouble, and say—'Father, I have sinned."

He moved down the hill with increased vigour of step, with a kindling of human kindness, and a warm desire to make up for past shortcomings. The old father loved Nell, too; he would surely feel with Simon, be drawn to him by the bonds of a shared trouble.

Descending rapidly, Simon dived into the thick mist of the hollow, and presently entered the formal old garden by a small stone-arched gateway. Thence he made his way through green galleries, and past the great hedge of clipped yew to the terrace steps.

Sir Hamo was sitting in his favourite bay, with his books beside him, but the reading-lamp turned low. On drawing close to the window, Simon saw that he was asleep, with one hand laid upon an open book, the other

supporting his bent head. The old man looked very worn and feeble, and seemed hardly to breathe ; a lonely pathetic figure he seemed to his son, whose heart smote him afresh as he drew nearer. The volume on the sleeper's knee was "In Memoriam," the only modern poem that had much appeal for Sir Hamo. He had been steeping himself in the divine despair of the verse, and now perchance was dreaming of the wife with whom had departed his desire of life.

Simon's yearning for reconciliation grew stronger ; and here surely were conditions ready fitted to that end, for his own heart was humbled, and the tears of the poet must have been falling like dew upon his father's. He stole softly into the house, making straight for the library door.

The old man awoke at the sound of his son's footsteps in the room, his grand silver head gleaming in the lamplight as he raised it. He scarcely seemed to recognize Simon

at first; his eye wandered vaguely round the room, as though passing over some dream-scene that had but half faded. Then he said slowly—

"Simon, is it you? I was dreaming of your mother. Her face was strangely near and real to me, and I perceive now that you are a little like her—only a little though, so no wonder I have never seen the likeness before. Yes, I was dreaming of her, and—and I think our re-union is not far off, for I feel very weak to-night, my heart troubles me, and I feel years older than yesterday. I believe that I shall soon leave you—my son."

It was long since he had thus addressed Simon; the words "my son" spoken in the delicate refined voice which had so long been used to grow harsh or petulant at Simon's approach, thrilled the latter in his wrought-up state, and carried fear with them—the dread that his father's end was really approach-

ing. He drew near the armchair, his eyes full of anxious solicitude. He dared not touch his father's hand for fear of scaring away this new-born complacence, but placed his own hand beside the old man's upon the open volume, saying—

"Father, father, don't talk of leaving me yet—just when you are learning to care for me. Father, I have need for you. I want you to forgive the pride which has never let me say this before."

"Ah, Simon, you've always been very proud and hard; dear Hamo—my dear son Hamo—would never have thwarted an old man's fancies as you have done. He was kind and gentle, not stiff and stubborn like you."

"Father, I have been to blame—yet God knows I have always loved you."

"Well, well, 'tis somewhat late in the day to tell me so. We have drifted apart—thanks to your pride and frowardness, Simon

—and it is over-late for soft speeches now."

"You are dreaming of my mother?" asked Simon, hoping thus to soften him.

"Yes, I was dreaming of a fair land full of flowers, through which she swept, coming to meet me with shining eyes. But I will not speak to you of that sacred meeting. You are like all the scientific men, hard and heartless; caring only to drudge and delve among material things; ay, you're even as the poet says—

> "'One that would peep and botanize
> Upon a mother's grave."

Simon's face hardened, and his voice grew bitter. "I suppose it is because of my hardness that the friend whom I trusted has betrayed me, the woman I loved has asked and obtained her release from me?"

"What do you mean? Are you befooling me to suit some whim?"

"A man hard-stricken as I am hardly cares to befool the only person in the world from whom he dares hope for sympathy."

"Do you mean—do you dare to tell me that you have quarrelled with Nell?"

The invalid half rose from his chair, his pale cheek flushed as he swept the volume from his knee and turned upon his son like a judge about to pronounce sentence.

"There has been no quarrel, sir," Simon answered with the indifference of one to whom all sentences are alike; "but it has happened to me to find out once for all that she has no affection for me. We are more widely separated than if we had never met."

"Then your conduct has been bad," cried the old man tremulously; "nothing but that could have estranged my loving generous Nell. You have neglected her; I've seen it, and spoken of it a dozen times. You've cared more for your 'work' as you call it, for haggling with some paltry group of

asteroids, or measuring some unthinkable distance in space, or—tush! I have no heart for casting up the sum of your follies; you have neglected her, I say!"

Simon listened with a hard smile, disdaining to defend himself, too proud and too loyal to think of accusing Nell.

"It is the last straw," murmured his father, sinking wearily back among his cushions. "I have nothing to detain me here now. I thought to have dear Nell here to comfort my last hours, smoothe my dying pillow; but even that you have denied me. You might at least have deferred your quarrel until I was laid to rest. You have grudged me even the few months of peace that were left me. Dear Nell—poor Nell! My son has neglected you and chilled even your heart, for I suppose a thankless son makes a cold lover."

"I will say no more, sir. You should try and get some rest. Will you take my arm, and let me assist you upstairs?"

"No, no; I will not take your arm. The very sound of your voice is painful to me to-night. You have dealt me the hardest blow that has been laid upon me since your mother's death. All I ask of you is to ring the bell and summon Mrs. Henley, who will give me what assistance I need."

Simon had fired his last shot, and had nothing now to fall back upon but his pride; but even so it was not in him to lay aside his courtesy or stoical forbearance. He assisted his father back to the armchair, endeavouring by the calmness of his manner to soothe the old man's agitation, then rang the bell to summon the housekeeper.

Mrs. Henley appeared with a suspicious readiness, which Simon in his present mood could interpret without difficulty; he guessed rightly that she had been listening to their duologue through the keyhole. She was a hard, thin-lipped, spiteful-looking woman, who now cast upon him a look of more open

dislike than she had ever hitherto permitted herself to enjoy.

There were gleams of triumphant malice in her cold eyes, and Simon, exercising his new-born faculty of suspicion with the swiftness of one "not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplexed in the extreme," looked through and through this woman for the first time in his life. He had been surprised at times, in a passing casual way, at her want of friendliness, old family retainer as she was; now he could trace her enmity to its source. She had expectations from Sir Hamo, looked for a fat legacy from the master whom she had often nursed in sickness, and had the inevitable hatred of a mean nature for Sir Hamo's heir. For years she had been helping to alienate the old man from his son; and Simon knew this now as certainly as though by her own confession.

Nor would Cousin Kathleen be henceforth in the least degree enigmatic to him: her

pains to gain an influence over Sir Hamo, her constant petty disparagement of himself, were now seen to have a plain meaning and an adequate first cause. Nay, more—for the whole truth seemed to burst upon him now in one vivid flash—it was she who had undermined him with Nell. It must be so; he could swear that it was so, though no such thought had ever entered his mind until this moment. She had favoured Terence, had been his backer and stealthy abettor, as Simon could perceive, now that the key of the situation was in his hand. Terence might have been her unconscious tool, but a tool he had been. She had used him to widen the breach between father and son, and so to wrench them asunder, and leave the old man with no one but herself to look to. That was the end which this cheery pleasant woman, this popular Lady Bountiful, whose good nature was a byword in the neighbourhood, had set herself, and had now

attained. So Simon, enlightened by his wrath and bitterness, concluded; and he was not far from the truth.

And how many more were to be writ down scheming plotters? In truth, Simon knew not where to stop; his bitterness widened and deepened until all the ground around him seemed to be rotten and shaky; until he resembled one who has dreamed of treading upon carpets of flowers, and wakes suddenly to find himself in the heart of a black, quaking bog, with foul mists brooding and crawling on all sides, with no path, no sky, no horizon, no hope.

CHAPTER II.

KATE TREDETHLYN was seated in the breakfast-room at Moor Gates next morning, awaiting the appearance of her father. Having received a telegram from him the night before, urging her immediate return home, she had thrown herself, full of gloomy forebodings, into the night mail, and had driven up to the door but a few minutes since.

Miss Nell, the servants told her on arrival, was in bed, and seemed very unwell, and it did seem as though—— But Kate would not give ear to another word, instinctively dreading to hear Mr. Clancy's name men-

tioned, and anxious to check the maids' gossiping, if possible. The telegram, by its very baldness, had put her mind upon the right track. Had there been sickness in question, it would have been mentioned. She was keenly conscious that some crisis quite unconnected with health had occurred, and her fears went straight to Nell and Terence Clancy.

Mr. Tredethlyn came down as soon as he was informed of Kate's arrival. He looked pale and perturbed after a sleepless night, and his daughter's greeting was far from encouraging. There was an awkward confession to be got through. He had to set forth, to a daughter whose attitude had always been rather critical than sympathetic, how certain things had been going on, unperceived, under his very nose, and what a climax of unpleasantness had supervened. Yet, from one or two points of view, it was a relief to see Kate, whose good sense could

always be relied upon; and he hoped that anxiety would at least dilute her sarcasm in some measure. On the whole he felt rather like one who, conscious of alarming symptoms, hastily summons his doctor, yet, dreading the probable curative treatment, thinks he will talk about the weather, after all.

Certainly it was nervous work beginning. He plumped into his chair ungracefully, and asked Kate somewhat plaintively to pour out his coffee. He could have been more dignified had she looked less stern.

Kate attended to her father's wants with grave propriety, but in the very movement of her fingers there was a promise of something sharper to come.

"I suppose," she began presently, steadying her voice with difficulty, "your hasty summons has something to do with Nell?"

"Precisely, my dear. I was just about to open the matter to you; but—but I'm afraid it will distress and vex you a good deal."

"I have scarcely a doubt but that it will be something unpleasant, father. Has Mr. Clancy been up here much lately?"

"He has—been staying here—for—a few days."

"Staying here? At whose invitation, father?"

"My own, of course, my dear."

"I see."

Kate's look resembled that of a schoolmaster when he turns to the corner where the cane stands; and if the large parson had not the face and figure of a schoolboy, he had the feelings of one at this moment. He winced painfully, his plump cheeks grew a shade paler. He was ready to agree twice over with everything Kate might say, and would have preferred almost any penance to the prickly possibilities of the next ten minutes.

"Pray tell me what has happened."

Kate's tone made him wince again; it had the shrewdness of an east wind.

Yet, now that he was really in for it, Mr. Tredethlyn recovered his courage, and was able to speak with dignity. He had always been a good speaker, and now gave as terse and telling an account of the events of the last few days as could be desired.

Kate listened with quivering nerves and a desire to go away and weep somewhere. Her very worst forebodings had come true; the situation seemed as disgraceful as she could well conceive. Her heart swelled with indignation against both Terence and Nell.

"No man was ever worse treated than Simon has been!" she cried, her tears breaking out and her voice choking.

"Yes," her father sighed heavily, "that is the quick of the ulcer—Nell's treatment of poor old Simon. I don't know how I shall ever look him in the face again."

"How could you have the man up here, father, and let him work upon Nell's

weakness day after day? How *could* you?"

"My dear, I never dreamt——"

"You should have dreamt," sobbed Kate. "I often gave you hints; I often tried to impress you with a sense of Nell's danger; and yet, the moment my back is turned, you overthrow all my precautions at a stroke. Oh, father, had you been but less wrapped up in your own little ailments——"

She stopped herself abruptly and covered her face with her hands. She had never spoken with such audacious candour before, and she saw that her words stung her father like a whip-lash. His large comely face flushed deeply as he drew himself up to answer her.

"My dear, I am aware that I have been to blame, but I never expected to be told so by my own daughter. Yes," he added, with a humility that made Kate ashamed in a moment, "I have been gravely to blame in

this matter, and the knowledge of my own shortcomings makes me anxious not to deal hardly with poor Nell."

Kate the undemonstrative drew near to her father and kissed him penitently. The situation, though pregnant with deeper trouble than they could yet foresee, had, at least, produced one good result, for father and daughter had never understood one another so well as at this moment.

"The man has a good heart," Mr. Tredethlyn continued in a troubled voice; "I'm bound to say that of Clancy, though his apparent perfidy pains me. I don't think, however, that there has been anything like deliberate treachery, but only culpable weakness, given way to and encouraged. As for Nell, her inconstancy amazes me."

"I won't have Nell abused, father; she never cared for Simon. Her collapse has been the end of a long struggle."

"But I have perceived nothing of the sort."

"No—precisely."

"Surely I must have——"

"I suppose you have been otherwise engaged, father."

Kate's voice was still a little dry.

"Was Terence aware of this?"

"I don't know, and don't care. I won't hear a word in the man's favour. I hate him—I *hate* him, I tell you!"

"He has done us a serious injury, and I find it hard enough to find any excuse for him, Kate. But, as I said, I blame myself also. There has been selfish blindness on my part. And justice is justice. Terence has certainly not spared himself. After that scene in the larch clump, when he came to confess, he told me how wretched he was, how he would rather have cut off his right hand than so injure a friend and benefactor——"

"Ah, yes; doubtless he protested enough.

Terence Clancy never wanted for eloquence. I hate a shifty, half-bad man like that worse than a genuine scoundrel!"

"Your sex is somewhat apt to appreciate a genuinely good man less than either, my dear."

"What did you say to the pair, father?"

"I hardly know, they overwhelmed me so with amazement; but doubtless I said some very bitter things, and certainly I forbade Nell to see or speak to Clancy again."

"I wish you could remember what you said, and I only hope you stung him to the quick. I would ask no greater happiness at this moment than five minutes of plain speech with Terence Clancy. But that would never do; anything of that sort might alienate Nell for life, for—mark me, father—She'll marry the man."

"My dear Kate, surely we can prevent that! I will flatly forbid such a sacrifice. The man is utterly unworthy of Nell."

"Ay—unworthy to tie her shoe-lace, and that's how she comes to care for him," said Kate, bitterly. "And think of the scandal, the disgrace—horrible! It goes to the marrow of one's bones to think what people will say of her. But trust me for knowing her, father; I say that no earthly power will prevent her having him now. If we choose to make a martyr of him, we may complete the disgrace by a clandestine match; but a match there will be."

"But surely our gentle little Nell can be worked upon and made to see——"

"Our little Nell is a person of strong nature and unspeakable obstinacy; and think to what a pitch she must have reached to break her engagement in this disgraceful way! No hope, believe me—not a grain."

"And poor Simon?"

"I can hardly bear to think of him, but shall write at once to let him know my opinion of all this. I believe nothing could

be worse for him just now than the silence of his friends. Better make him rage than let him brood."

"I believe you are right, Kate. It will be well for me to write also, though a more painful duty was never laid upon me. What are we to do about Clancy? what steps shall I take?"

"Nothing we can do will make any difference in the end, be assured of that. We may procrastinate a little, and so water down our disgrace in a measure. Let Nell be sent away from now until, say, December, which will give Chillington about three months to masticate and digest the broken engagement, and will make the next news less shocking. I will answer for Mrs. French-Chichester's silence. It will be generally understood that Nell and Simon have quarrelled, and there'll be so many theories as to the cause that the truth may chance to get lost among them."

"In that case, blame might accrue to Simon. Better tell the whole truth than that."

"There'll be plenty of blame thrown about, whatever course you take, father. Some will blame Simon, others Nell; and nearly all will blame us. Every one will say, 'I told you so!' and every second person, 'Serve them right!' We can no more hinder the shower than we can the autumn rains just beginning. I shall go about in a macintosh of haughtiness, that's all—and get myself more unpopular than ever."

"What about Terence during Nell's absence?"

"He must visit us—at least now and then, in a formal way. If you cut him, you show your hand at once, and, what is far more serious, you destroy any vestige of hope we have of bringing Nell to her senses. Once make a martyr of Terence, and good-bye to her. She and Simon are too much alike—

that's the plain truth. I've always feared for them, and heartily wish she had broken with him before this subtle Irishman came on the scene. Our Quixotic pair never were like other people—never quite rational; always in excess, always wandering in some dazzling region where the light is too strong for ordinary human nature."

"One more thing, Kate—after Nell returns?"

"Don't talk of that time," she cried, "after that the deluge—at least the wedding, for something tells me to expect the worst."

CHAPTER III.

ON a certain windless day, late in December, Simon Secretan was leaning over the low stone wall of the Monks Damerel road, looking down over Chillington. Through the thin clearing mist a trickle of rather wan light fell upon the roof of the railway station beneath him, upon the grey old town-hall beyond, and the square Gothic tower of the old church. There was little traffic along this road in the winter; Simon had a long stretch of it all to himself now. He was gazing intently, moving no more than the great rough stones upon which his arms rested.

For a long time he remained thus motionless, but at length the rumble of wheels induced him to turn his head round. A farmer's gig had just climbed the steep hill from the station, and its driver was touching up his horse with a view to a trot along the level, when a pale-looking woman, who sat beside him, caught sight of the leaning figure by the wall, and held up her hand.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Baker; but here *is* Mr. Secretan, so there's no call to trouble you further. Will you hand me out my baby-girl when I've got down?"

The young woman—she was but two-and-thirty, though strangers would have given her another ten years—descended; whereupon Mr. Baker handed down, impassively as he would have done a leg of mutton, or a plucked fowl, a child of two years or thereabouts.

"Little sweetheart—precious little Rose-

bud, come to mother! Now say, 'Thank you, Mr. Baker.'"

"I s'ant!" said the child decisively.

The impassive Baker showed no concern, however, but drove on with a lift of his finger and a "Mornin', missis."

Simon, hearing his name mentioned, stared at the mother and child in a dazed sort of way, but could make nothing of them.

"Why, Mr. Simon, don't you know me, sir?"

"Is it you, Joyce? Where have you sprung from? You must forgive me, but—I was lost in thought," Simon added, after a pause. The words which had first sprung to his lips were, "you're such a wreck of your former self, poor girl, that no wonder I didn't know you."

"You find me looking rather corpse-like, eh, sir?"

"No, no; a little pale."

Joyce laughed, and in doing so took Simon back a dozen years in half a second.

"There spoke your old self, sir; you would always sooner walk a dozen miles than heart a body's feelings! That's how it was I never could sauce you as I did my stepmother. Ay, and even Sir Hamo himself at times."

Ill as she was, Joyce still looked quite capable of "saucing" a stepmother at a pinch. There was a lurking humour in her eye, an upward twitch about the corners of her mouth, and withal a hovering petulance —the aftermath of a self-willed girlhood— which her worn looks but half concealed. She was a stepdaughter of Sir Hamo's housekeeper, and had been brought up in the establishment from as far back as Simon could remember, indeed, had often been his nursery companion in old days. She was a small, whimsical, hot-tempered creature, who was made much of by almost all, and would be put upon by none. So popular did she become with the household, as she grew up,

that her stepmother's jealous pangs waxed unbearable, and a daily increasing stream of complaints was poured into her master's ears. Sir Hamo's weak favouritism was easily played upon; every word of Mrs. Henley's had weight with him. Soon after the settlement of the family in these parts Joyce was packed off, after a severe interchange of broadsides with Mrs. Henley, to a genteel milliner's establishment in Chillington.

So placed, her skill and taste tended to countervail a slight leaning towards insubordination. If the discipline of the establishment suffered somewhat, its profits increased; and Joyce was in a fair way to success by the time a new weakness showed itself. She fell in love.

In company with her bosom friend, Mary Pethick, Joyce had turned up her nose at all the young shopkeepers of the place; but one evil day her humorous grey eye lighted

upon a fine young cavalry sergeant from Lymport, by name Melladew.

At first Sergeant Melladew accepted her homage with good-humour; when it continued, he began to give ear to the reports concerning her stepmother's successful pickings up at the Hall; then, having an even keener eye for the main chance than for female beauty, he decided to allow Joyce's good worldly prospects to outweigh the moderate quality of her looks. The rest followed in due course. Sergeant Melladew married, retired, and began to drink away his wife's earnings. Chillington was found too dull for him, and its profits too small. He carried her off to Lymport, and installed her in a larger establishment—and the increased profits were met and parried by superior thirst. In brief, the man was a drunken brute — also a savage-tempered, loud-cursing, unfaithful brute. Joyce led with him a life of such wretchedness as

satisfied even Mrs. Henley. She said nothing about it on her brief visits to the Pethicks and other old friends; but her paling cheek and failing step were a plain tale not to be misunderstood.

Some years had passed, when ex-Sergeant Melladew's life came to an appropriate and fitting close. His head was broken by the quart pot of an intimate, but quarrelsome, friend one evening in a tavern brawl at Lymport, and he only survived long enough to discharge one final bouquet of oaths. Joyce then found herself a free woman, though a broken one; and her chief desire, amounting almost to a mania, was to live long enough to guard her little Rose from the Sergeant Melladews who might cross her path. But Joyce's body had never been strong enough to support her gallant spirit; every week now, as it passed, ate away a fresh piece of her hope, for five years of a savage yoke had thoroughly broken her constitution.

When Simon began to ask about her health and prospects, she dismissed the subject with half a dozen words and a hard laugh; but no eloquence could have given him a clearer impression of her case. He felt strangely drawn to this widow, who had once upon a time been his playmate in the nursery.

"And this is your little Rose, is it Joyce? I've heard of her once or twice through your friend Mary."

"Yes, sir; this is my sweet and precious little rosebud girl." It was another voice that spoke now—a mother-voice, tender and soft as a spring breeze.

Simon marvelled at the change, having as yet studied human nature in the abstract rather than the concrete, and having been little thrown with mothers and children.

Little Rose returned his gaze with interest. She was a quaint, crisp little creature, with a tangle of fair curls, and dark-grey, roguish eyes.

"She has your—your——" he began, with a man's slowness in getting at the points of a child.

"My impudence, Mr. Simon? Ay, and happen she'll keep it—until she marries. Ah, if I had but a good watchdog for the little one when I'm gone!"

"What has brought the pair of you here from Lymport, Joyce?"

"Why, just this, sir. I've had Mary Pethick stayin' with me for some time, and I wanted to bring her back safe to her father—for I'm not easy in my mind about that young thing, Mr. Simon."

"What ails her? I haven't seen her about here for months."

Joyce looked up with a queer twist in her face, and seemed to be weighing something.

"That's just what I was comin' to see you about, sir. I told Mary I should, and she's mighty savage with me in consequence. Hows'ever, I'm not easily frightened, and

here I am. Mary's in trouble. She was engaged to be married to——"

"Ezekiel Doidge? Yes, I know, and it was broken off."

"Psha! that's nothing. Why was it broke off?—that's the question."

"I haven't a notion."

"That looks bad; he's a shrewd un, I fear! Harkee, sir—'twas because she was in love with some one else, with a gentleman, whose ring she's still wearin', who was her promised husband. He got tired of her o' course—one man's the same as another, as far as I know—and left off walkin' out with her. Lord bless me, 'tis an old story enough. She wrote and wrote, but never got another word out of him. He was makin' up to some lady of his own station, I doubt. Well, I judged from the girl's letters that she was miserable, and had her over to Lymport to help me with my Rosie, and get cheered up a bit—though the cheerin' han't come off

yet. That's all you need know at present, sir. An' you're a deal too innocent to guess any more," she added, under her breath.

"Poor little Mary! Is her health bad? Is she much upset by this? What can I do for her?"

"Ah, that just the point. She han't written to the gentleman for some time, but now she *must* see him."

"But, my good Joyce, how can I help her there?"

"Easy enough, sir. He's an intimate friend o' yours, as she tells me,—a man as you've been a brother to and started in life, and—— "

She stopped abruptly. Simon had fallen back a pace or two, and was staring at her amazedly.

"He's a young doctor," an Irishman—— "

"I know, I know," muttered Simon. "There's nothing to be done, Joyce; she

must bear her disappointment as other people have to do."

"Disappointment!" she repeated fiercely. "Ah, how some of my husband's cuss-words would help me now!"

Joyce walked aside for a space, with a sullen flush darkening her pale face, and neither spoke.

After a few moments the silence was broken by the sound of bells. A loud joyous peal clanged from the tower of the parish church below them.

"A weddin' peal, I reckon?" Joyce burst forth with a harsh laugh. "I wonder who's the victim this time? What's the lady's name, Mr. Simon?"

"The bells are ringing for Miss Tredethlyn's marriage."

"Not Miss Nell? not the one that was——"

"Yes, the one that was mine."

"Sir, Mr. Simon, I didn't know, or

I wouldn't have come pesterin' you to-day."

"Why not? One day's the same as another."

"Who's she marryin', sir?"

"The gentleman you were speaking of."

"Mr. Terence Clancy?" Joyce laughed loudly and bitterly. "Lord, Lord, 'tis such a bitter bad world that one must laugh or cry!"

Again they gazed down over the station-roof in silence.

The streets in the neighbourhood of the church were hidden by the houses, but there was evidently a stir in the place. People were hurrying across the open square by the town-hall, and the rumble of carriages could be heard through the swelling clang of the bells.

"How long has this affair been public news, sir?"

"Barely a fortnight, by the express wish of those concerned."

"I suppose that's how it is not a rumour of it has drifted over to Lymport. Look here, sir, yesterday Mary Pethwick was in a queer state, oppressed with forebodings and fears, and she urged me to let her go; but my Rose wan't well, so I couldn't go with her,—and now we're too late. Ah! I should ha' sent her off, I should ha' sent her off! I've spoilt her one chance now, poor Mary. O' course Fate's dead agen' her—who ever knew a stroke o' luck come to any but a downright bad lot? Will you come an' see her now?" Joyce concluded abruptly.

"Certainly—where is she?"

"Waitin' for us at the canal bridge below the farm. I promised to join her there after seeing you, and settlin' upon some plan for getting' hold o' Mr. Clancy. We had best go down Pixie Lane, past the new cottages, and so on by the canal path."

"Are you able to walk the distance, Joyce?"

"I mean to, able or not."

"Then give me the child."

This was more easily said than done. Miss Rose, finding herself perched upon the shoulder of a great tall stranger, screamed as though the universe were on the point of collapse, nor had big Simon the ghost of an idea how to pacify her. This gave him an opportunity, however, of watching the practice of an art, new to him, but old as the human race.

For the baby's attention was in a trice distracted to a passing "puff-puff." Before that was out of sight, a robin piping from the ash-tree hard by was pointed out as an object of breathless interest. Next, a small boy with clinking milk-cans was offered up in like manner, grinning to find himself so much admired. Simon, noting how suddenly the big tears ceased to roll, thought it all a marvel of cleverness.

Then poor mother was so tired, so very

tired, that it was needful for the baby to stroke her cheek and say, "Poor—poor; oh, poor—poor, not we-e-ll!" This formula, quaintly drawled, with a wrinkling of the small nose, was the signal for peace; the Rosebud began to chuckle and kick as they moved off, to drum on Simon's breast with heels, to clutch his hair and moustache, and presently to tear off his hat and beat him on the head with its brim. And so they passed down the hillside, the child bubbling and babbling, and shrieking with laughter, only stopping now and then to cry, "Poor—poor; oh, poor—poor!"

Had Joyce known who was following them at a distance, she would have led Mr. Secretan anywhither rather than to Hollacomb Farm, for, unknown to her, Ezekiel Doidge had seen her arrival with Mary, seen the latter walk away homewards, watched Joyce get into Mr. Baker's gig, and guessed her destination.

Ezekiel had been in a bad way ever since Mary's departure for Lymport. On the night of their farewell, when he finally released his betrothed from her engagement, he had parted from her with bitter words and fierce hints as to Mr. Secretan, his supsupposed rival; and the folly of this had weighed upon him since. He had written almost abject letters to Mary, entreating her to forgive his harsh conduct, and always to let him be her friend. The only answer she had vouchsafed him had been gentle and humble—so unlike herself, indeed, as to frighten him. He wished earnestly that she would return that he might keep a friendly watch upon her, and reason her out of this fatuous inclination towards a gentleman so far out of her reach.

In his jealous, harassed mind, Ezekiel had worked out an explanation of the sudden breakage of Secretan's engagement. Miss Nell, he conceived, must have had sus-

picions, must have become aware of some secret communication between her lover and Mary Pethick; and now that the engagement was over, there would be nothing to check such intercourse. This thought drove Ezekiel half crazy. He watched the trains in from Lymport day after day, or made secret excursions thither to spy out Mary's goings on; and now his worst suspicions were confirmed. Here was Mary's friend capturing Secretan and leading him off—reluctantly, too, as Doidge's eager suspicion suggested—to an interview with Mary. It looked black, inky black, to poor driven Ezekiel. He followed them now, sweating with jealous dread and hatred.

Sheltered by the woods on the south side of the valley, Ezekiel watched the pair cross the open and turn down the path beside the canal, when there was no longer any doubt in his mind that they were in search of Mary. Nor was there any hurry, since a

short cut across some of his own fields, just below Mr. Secretan's new allotment gardens, would take him to the farm well before them. He had time to loiter while he forged into one chain the links of suspicion that circumstances, aided by Mary's unhappy shuffling, had placed in his hand.

Meanwhile, Simon and his companions progressed slowly. Joyce was almost dropping with fatigue by the time they had gone half a mile, and needed many rests; and little Rose, well dowered as she was with her mother's wilfulness, insisted upon being set down frequently in order to make tottering excursions after dogs, pigs, chickens, and other such creatures of the chase. Nor was there any talk worth mentioning between them. Joyce would say not a word more as to Mary Pethick, except, "Wait and see, Mr. Simon, then I think you'll know all."

They passed slowly along the canal path, halting many times. Terence Clancy's in-

sistent joy-bells followed them, never ceasing for a moment. By the time they reached the farm, the afternoon was closing in, and Joyce felt that she could barely muster courage to crawl on as far as the ivied bridge, where Mary would be awaiting them.

It was there that Mary had first plighted her troth to Ezekiel, and finally parted from him; there that she had first met Terence Clancy, and thrilled at his kind voice and friendly words. She had a fatalistic attraction towards the spot, as though her fate were bound up with it. "You'll have bad news to bring me, I know, Joyce," she had remarked, "and I'd rather take the blow there than anywhere."

Mary was standing close to the bridge when they arrived, among the broken reeds and trampled leafage of autumn; and what flicker of hope there was in her face died out as soon as her eyes met Joyce's eyes. The wan smile froze on her lips, and the going forth

of her feeble hope shook Simon to the soul. Joyce's forecast proved correct—he needed no explanation. He was looking for the first time upon despair, and recognized it as certainly as he would have done death. But a moment ago he had been oppressed by the melancholy of nature, by the fading of daylight among ruined woodlands; now he could only see the girl's face. Before this human misery the scene, with its surface pathos, melted away, leaving only the stricken face, from which he could not look away. It filled him with a gnawing pain, bore in upon him the infinite littleness of such troubles as had fallen to his own lot; it was as though all the travail of a groaning world were concentrated for a moment in a single pair of human eyes.

He turned aside, leaving poor shaken Joyce, as he thought in his heart, to do the last offices for the dead Hope, since the living soul from which it had fled could know no comfort.

CHAPTER IV.

THE brief two weeks which Terence had been able to snatch for his honeymoon were over; he had brought home his bride to the White House on the hill.

It was Nell's first morning in her new home. Terence was awaiting her in the little breakfast-room, looking cheerfully out over the town and the hills, gleaming crisp and clear after forty-eight hours of rain. He had been stripping the small greenhouse and decorating the breakfast-table with the spoils. A bright fire crackled in the grate; a glint of winter sun struck boldly in through

the French windows as though to emphasize and make the most of Terence's floral greetings to his young bride.

As he stood by the window, Nell rustled into the room, and her smile was good to look upon.

"How like you, Terence," she cried, pointing at the table, "to squander every flower you possess upon me in this way! You've already gone far towards spoiling me, dear."

She went round the table, examining every flower, praising everything. Nell had always been one of those for whom it is a pleasure to do things; one whose quick gratitude for a trifling service made one reflect how easy must have been her nurse's task in first teaching her to say "Thank you." When his bride took her place before the tea-urn, flushed with pride and happiness, Terence could hardly take his eyes off her.

"There's not a flower here half good

enough for you, dear," he exclaimed with fervour. "There's not one half so beautiful as your sweet self!"

"Ah, be off wid your blarney!" laughed Nell. "Ye're more Irish than I thought ye."

"Faith, you've got a heap of my failings to discover yet, Nell; they'll be pouring down on you soon, like last night's rain. My word, how it did drive and pelt! I see the river's in heavy flood this morning. Some of the people in the cottages down there'll be having a bad time, I fear."

"Let us go and see them presently, when you have time. But I suppose you'll be hard at work all the morning, Terence? When do you expect to be free from your consulting-room?"

"Why, you see, this is our first morning at home; and a man can't plunge head foremost into hard labour without taking a deep breath or two first. Jack Syme will

do the oakum-picking this morning. What's the good of an assistant, if he doesn't take the drudgery off one's hand?"

Terence sighed a little at the mention of work, proceeding with his breakfast a shade more thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't be surprised," he continued, after a pause, "if I have to take Jack into partnership pretty soon. It would save a deal of trouble in the end."

"And would also diminish the profits a good deal, wouldn't it, dear?"

"What a mercenary little woman it is!"

"Why, yes; and you know the reason, Terence."

Nell also became thoughtful; and he was well aware of the drift of her thought. She was more than anxious about his debt—for so they both agreed to call it—to Simon, and was bent upon maintaining a course of rigid economy until it should have been paid in full.

As for the proposed transference of this debt to Mrs. French-Chichester, Terence had heard no more about it, and never expected to do so now that he knew the widow better. He was troubled by this obligation to Simon, but not so deeply permeated by it as was Nell. To him repayment was an object on the horizon, to be kept in view in a general way, and attained some day or other; to her, a goal to be striven for night and day.

He was humbly conscious of being on a lower moral plane than his wife. He looked to her to stiffen up his character, to be tolerant of his weaknesses, to lead him gently in the right way, the while she petted and idolized him. But Nell was yet very far from sharing these views. Her ideal was not to be shattered by a fortnight of marriage. She would have scoffed at the notion of his needing her help. He found it hard to work steadily—she knew that—

but the mere routine of his profession must naturally be irksome to so clever a man. His enthusiasm would doubtless be kept for great things; in the small ones, perhaps, a commonplace woman like herself, with no particular talent in any direction, might be occasionally useful. That was Nell's conception of the matter.

"Don't you think," she asked, when their meal was over, and she was standing before the fire with her hand in her wedded lover's, "that my father might help us in this trouble?"

"Ask him, dear," suggested Terence, with a twinkle in his eye. He had more than once had an opportunity of observing Mr. Tredethlyn's aversion to parting with money—a weakness patent enough to every one but Nell.

"Well, perhaps it wouldn't be quite fair?" she muttered, regretfully. "You know best."

"Perhaps it wouldn't be much use," thought Terence; but he only pressed her hand.

"Then we must make up our minds to hard work and strict economy. We shan't spend nearly all you earn, shall we? And I shan't want any new things for ever so long, Terence; and we can easily do with only two servants. I suppose you must keep both horses?"

"Ye-es; there'll be a long ride round the district every afternoon, don't you see? One horse would knock up in no time."

"Could you sell the hunter, and buy a cheap hack in his place?"

"Bless me!" thought Terence, "she'll be asking me to do the rounds on shanks's mare, dressed in fustian, soon! My dear child," he said aloud, with a flicker of his humorous eyes, "I must hunt in order to keep up the connection; and for the same reason we must keep a parlour-maid in

addition to the other two, and keep up appearances generally."

"I see."

"Where are you off to now, Nellie?"

"To order lunch and dinner and see to all sorts of things."

"Well, then, I'll go to that torture-chamber and get on the rack at once. Some fool or other with an imaginary ailment is sure to be waiting there to stretch me. Jack Syme shall be freed for the town work this morning." He sighed deeply, but his wife promptly braced him up with a ravishing smile. "Yes, by George, I'll go and work like any nigger! Haven't I got the sweetest wife in Christendom to work for? Little girl, you always put me straight. I'd be a decent, hard-working man by now if I'd met ye years ago. Bedad, my brain's crackling with good resolutions now; and don't you believe what people tell you about such things going to pave the 'other place.'

They're like good grain, I maintain, with fine possibilities about 'em. You sow, and of course every grain doesn't germinate; but *some do*, and you get a crop of some sort, however bad the season."

And so they parted for the present.

Terence was right as to the flooded condition of Chilling Water. The vehement stream was ramping forth from its moorland gorge and down its rocky bed, with spume and fret and fury. Leaping into the cultivated parts above the town, it overspread Mr. Doidge's meadows as though angered at the tamer scenery, and gurgled into the cottages of his labourers in a masterful regardless fashion suggestive of the great Ezekiel himself.

Just below the town bridge the fierce river hurled itself in a gleaming curve over the artificial barrier created at this point in order to pen the water and press it into the mouth of the Hollacomb canal or leat. The water

needed little persuasion in this direction now, but poured through the leat and flooded the vicarage garden knee-deep.

About midday half Chillington was gathered near the bridge, watching the flood and enjoying the unusual excitement.

"D'ye reckon," asked one of another, "that the weir'll hold out long agen thiccy?"

"Like enough her won't."

"If her gives, 'twill relieve this mort o' watter up over, and flood Mr. Secretan's cottages down along worse nor they be a'ready."

"So 'twould. And I tell 'ee what—'twould run the canal dry, like enough."

"How so, mister?" This question was put by half a dozen people at once.

"Because, you zanies, this pule be eight foot deep along o' the barrier, and, if her gave, 'twould run down to two or three, and lay bare the mouth o' the leat. Should have thought any vule could a-zeed that. I've

knowed the thing 'appen one dry zummer years agone, and the watter runned off and left leat channel dry as a gravel path."

"I don't believe it, gaffer," laughed Dr. Clancy from the fringe of the crowd.

Then a dozen voices clanged, for or against, and so heady a wrangle ensued that Terence tucked his wife under his arm with a laugh and left them to settle it.

The pair walked away down stream together, bending to the buffets of a humming gale, enjoying the movement and briskness of things in general. On all sides of them were townsfolk hurrying to the water side, the business of the place being for the nonce suspended.

Nell was bent upon a brisk walk along the Bickington road, which followed the river for some distance, and which, as it rose the hill by Hollacomb, would give them a good view of the pools and cascades overhung by the Manor House.

Terence acquiesced in this route, but without enthusiasm. He was averse to following a road which passed almost within hail of Hollacomb Farm; not so much from actual apprehension of meeting with Mary, for he thought her to be still at Lymport, as from a general dislike of the farm's neighbourhood.

To do him justice, however, it must be said that, having read none of her letters, he had no suspicion whatever of Mary's being in great trouble. Ever since finally committing his heart to Nell's care he had kept Mary completely outside his mental horizon. So much he had achieved without difficulty, having the useful faculty, for which many would give half they possess, of thrusting all ordinary troubles into some dark cupboard of his mind and turning the key upon them. When he thought of her at all, his sanguine imagination easily conceived her as ere long returning to the faithful

Doidge, or some other old lover, and living happily ever afterwards. But it cost him a qualm or two to take Nell anywhere near the scene of that dead romance.

Just below the town the Bickington road was raised above the low-lying meadows by an embankment, down to which ran the allotment gardens pertaining to Simon's new row of cottages. Upon reaching this point Nell and Terence looked down upon a curious scene.

The whole breadth of the gardens was converted into a muddy lake, scourged and flawed by the strong west wind; the neat row of cottages stood waist-deep in water.

Many persons had warned Secretan of such a possibility as this, but his genial agent, Jackson, had recommended the site strongly —doubtless for reasons having roots in his breeches'-pocket — and Simon's fatal good nature had been disastrous as usual.

Simon himself had been working like a

horse all the morning, superintending the removal of goods and furniture, and doing much of the work with his own strong arms. He was at this moment staggering through the flood with certain belongings of his tenant Mrs. Parminter, who inhabited one of the cottages at a nominal rent. This good woman was the wife of an honest bombardier, who, after serving his time, was glad to re-engage and rejoin his battery in India with a view to living out of tongue-range of the most gifted shrew in Chillington town. Simon had taken pity upon the deserted wife, and was now reaping the reward of his virtue.

Mrs. Parminter was in fact seated upon her garden wall, viciously drumming the stones with her heels, the while she poured the full weight of her abuse upon her benefactor. Mr. Secretan had built these sties of cottages on purpose to delude honest folk; his philanthrophy was nothing but accursed

hypocrisy ; his kindness a sham and a lie ; he was a disgrace to the name of gentleman. Thanks to *he* she was a ruined woman ; thanks to *he* every one of her little uns would be down with fever, while she herself died of the chill and the misery, and so on, and so on.

Nell listened with a sick heart, a yearning to speak a word of friendship to Simon. She was very sore and sorry about him, and at the great barrier placed by circumstances between him and herself. Yet she could never say a word to him, never sympathize with him by a look. She was debarred from even speaking of what lay so near her heart, for Terence disliked the subject, was jealous of the reverence in which Nell held the discarded lover.

Terence was chafing now at her mournful looks. He hurried her away quickly westwards, and was moody and silent for the next half-mile.

Just below Hollacomb the road, after leaving the river for a space, passed over a small knoll, upon climbing which they both uttered exclamations of astonishment. They had come in sight of the river again, and the first glance showed that there had been a sudden increase of the flood.

"Look!" cried Nell, "the water is much higher, and how it roars and foams! The dam must have broken."

"No doubt it has; and now those wiseacres of the town, who are probably wrangling still, will have a chance of settling their dispute as to the canal. Shall we walk on towards Bickington?"

They moved briskly on, presently leaving the main road for deep winding lanes. For an hour they trudged along without meeting a soul, then halted at a roadside inn near Bickington with a view to afternoon tea, for which Nell declared herself to be pining. The exercise, together with the resplendent

mood of nature—for it was a keen crisp winter afternoon—had given a brighter tinge to their reflections; this comely young couple were hungry, happy, and radiant to look upon as they entered the inn parlour.

"Never have I a-zeed a prettier pair nor thiccy," said the landlord to his wife, when they adjourned to the kitchen together after taking Terence's orders.

Nell would never forget that picnic tea with her newly made husband. Such a bright world seemed before them as they rested in the snug little room—home and love, honest work and honourable endeavour; not a mere path through fairyland to possible disillusion, but rather a homely work-a-day road, with hills to be breasted, dust to be borne; with something to deepen and prove a man's love, to give a fond wife the privilege of joyous self-sacrifice.

Terence found his own mare, Rosalind, in the inn stable, Syme having driven over to

a pressing case a short time since. Presently Jack Syme appeared from the direction of the village, and after a brief discussion of the new case, was taken indoors for a cup of tea.

Mr. Syme, being little in the way of society, had never yet actually spoken to Mrs. Clancy. Terence noted with pride how almost awestruck with admiration the man was when first presented to his bride. Her sweet and winning manner, however, seemed to act upon Jack like a charm, and the more so since he had looked for the cold superiority with which the town and neighbourhood were wont to treat him. He sat down—almost at ease, comparatively speaking—took his cup of tea from Nell's small hand, and did his honest best to make himself agreeable.

With people like Nell it is difficult to try and please without succeeding, and Jack tried so hard that she was quick to conceive

him one of the kindest and most good-natured of men. She had the knack of encouraging a man to talk about himself—a topic upon which a man must needs be eloquent if he have the gift of speech at all. At any rate Jack soon found himself discoursing of his old life at Bartholomew's, of opera bouffe and burlesque, farcical comedy and the ballet, of billiards and supper parties; even of the little home at Hammersmith, of the old mother and the general servant, and their kindness to a rollicking scapegrace of a student like himself. In a word, his heart and tongue warmed, as a man's will under a woman's gentle tact, until he began to think of revising his rather pessimistic views of the comfortable classes. He was grateful to Terence, too, for the lift in life provided by his good nature, and not a little pleased at the utter rout of that old enemy, Simon Secretan.

"Look here, Terence," this was Syme's

parting speech as he got into the dog-cart and gathered up his reins, "you've married the sweetest girl in Christendom, and the loveliest; and, upon my soul, I think you deserve your luck. I hope you'll be as happy as a king, old boy!" And so this idyllic little tea-party ended with a flourish of congratulation.

By the time Nell and her husband had retraced their steps as far as the knoll under Hollacomb, evening was approaching. As they halted a moment to look back towards the great hills and the sunset, nature seemed to be spreading a pageant by way of raising further their uplifted hearts. Before them the sky was streaked and slashed with flaming orange, behind them, suffused with tender rose and pearl and opal. Great cumulus clouds, like ranges of alps with shoulders rounded off, hung majestically over the moor to the south, massive and quiet, as though solemnly resting after stress and storm.

Below them the river roared, hurling spray over gleaming boulder and sodden bank, and plunging whitely into the gloom of darkling woods.

"All the colour and beauty seem to affect me like organ music to-night," murmured Nell, drawing close to Terence's side.

But he could not respond to her exaltation. The scenery of this Hollacomb gorge oppressed him. But a few months since he had gazed upon just such a flaming sky from an opening in the woods hard by, and heard much the same sentiment expressed in the tones of another woman who loved him. How patronizing he had been to Mary, how good naturedly he had smiled at her little poetical outburst! Soon, perhaps, she would be back from Lymport, and sooner or later he must face her upbraiding eyes. Terence felt humble and low-spirited at this moment; with Nell beside him, his better self was apt to say harsh things.

"Terence," she said presently, pulling at his arm, "let us go home by the canal, for I'm anxious to see how the water has fared?"

"But, my dear child, your feet are wet already; and the canal path will be sodden. We had better get home by the road, which saves a good quarter of an hour."

"No, no; I must see the canal. It is not ten minutes out of the way; and you must give in, for it is such a pleasure to make you obey me!"

Nell laughed with a child's glee as she pressed him canal-wards.

Terence hesitated, but only for a moment. He was anxious to please her, and in the absence of Mary there was no real danger about the route.

"Lead on, then, ye persuasive little witch," he cried. "Sure I'll follow ye to the other end of the world!"

A short climb up a steep lane brought

them on to the canal-path. Upon reaching it, they halted, struck with amazement. The prophecy of the old man at the town bridge was fulfilled, the water had run off, the bed of the canal lay bare to the sky save for a sullen pool here and there.

"I never could have believed it!" cried Nell, "especially with your opinion to back me?"

"Well, it's a snub for me, and no mistake. But come, little girl, let us hurry home; it is dismal enough among these dripping trees."

They trudged on accordingly, the orange clouds burning away to chocolate and drab, the evening fog rising fast. They soon reached the ivied bridge below Hollacomb Farm, and Terence hastened his steps, anxious to put behind him this trysting-place with its atmosphere of love-vows broken and passion grown cold.

They had actually passed the bridge,

when something prompted him to look back over his shoulder. In doing so, he stopped suddenly; his face went ashen grey; a low shuddering cry escaped him.

"What is it? Terence, dearest husband, you frighten me? . . . O God, help her! How pitiful, how pitiful!"

Nell's heart stopped; for a moment she groped in the air for support, while the horror and pathos of what she saw sank into her brain. For close to the grey old bridge, among broken brown reeds and trodden leaves, and twigs and gravel left by the flood, lay a silent pitiful thing that had once been a woman. Nell knew at once that she was dead, for the face was visible. Yet she called upon the figure by its name as though the lifeless clay could answer—

"Mary, Mary!" she wailed. "Oh, speak to me—Mary, poor Mary!"

Yet, stricken as she was with pity and

horror, Nell was too well accustomed to look on death, thanks to experiences among the poor, to lose control of herself for more than a moment or two. She stepped down the muddy bank; then with trembling hands raised the poor head upon her knee, and put aside the dripping hair, while her tears fell fast upon the face that could never more feel caress of love nor warmth of human touch.

"Oh, Terence, come and help me! I can't bear her to lie here—poor, poor Mary!"

But Terence could neither move nor speak. The sudden horror seemed to have frozen his faculties. He stood propped against an alder-trunk, rigidly staring at the pool under the old bridge. For the present thought could articulate but one word—"Suicide."

"She must have fallen in somewhere near the farm and been carried down by

the flood!" murmured Nell, stroking the dead cheek reverently.

Terence made a strained effort to speak: but one word would come from him. "Suicide," he muttered; then sank down to the roots of the alder, reclining against the trunk.

"Never, never!" said Nell, earnestly. "Why should you accuse poor Mary? She was the happiest of girls, the last in the world to commit such a crime; it has been a sad accident—no more."

"Accident?" as he clutched at the word and repeated it, his voice came back to him. "Yes, yes, you're right, Nell, an accident. I never thought of that. I only knew her by sight, and thought perhaps——"

He hardly knew what he was saying. Instinct was urging him to lie; but reason had not yet told him in what direction to begin.

Nell was distressed for her husband. She

knew him for a soft-hearted man—so much so, indeed, that the practice of his profession was often a torture to him—and here was another proof of the tenderness of his nature. She urged him not to mind her, pointing out that some labourer on his way home would probably be passing soon.

This suggestion roused Terence. He called upon his failing will, stiffened himself, and stood upright. Very soon the sound of approaching footsteps struck upon his ear, and seemed to put firm ground under him in a moment. Fear revived him like some magic elixir.

The footsteps were those of Simon Secretan, who was at this moment searching for Mary. Not a day had passed lately without his seeing her; but her seeming quietness had allayed his first fears concerning her. Upon coming to the farm about an hour since, however, and learning from her father that she had not been home for some time,

he had felt uneasy; and when a careful search through her favourite haunts had failed to discover her, his uneasiness deepened into alarm.

For a little incident had occurred the day before, which, without impressing him much at the time, seemed now to have a possibly terrible significance.

Simon was watching the flooded canal with Mary, when a heavy billet of wood came floating past.

"Now, I wonder," said Mary, carelessly, "whether that log will be borne on into the Culmer, and finally carried far out to sea by the broad river?"

"Probably it might. Why do you ask, Mary?"

"Just from passing curiosity. It struck me that the log might be so borne away, and the owner, searching for his lost property, might never know what had become of it. Probably no one will ever set eyes on it again, you think?"

"I dare say not."

The incident, together with Mary's words, took more and more hold of Simon's mind as his search continued; and his forebodings increased steadily until, by the time he reached the bridge, he had almost given up hope of finding her anywhere alive.

Thus, the scene on the canal bank was but half a surprise to the searcher. He took it in at a single glance. Terence was standing under the alder, working himself up to face the coming intruder. Nell was still crouching under the bank with the dead girl across her knees.

Simon's look was strange and solemn as he stepped down beside her; but Nell was struck by the absence of amazement in it. His expression was rather that of one who finds a mournful expectation fulfilled, than of one confronted by an unexpected tragedy. Not a word did he speak, but he took up Nell's burden gently and bore it away to the farm.

Terence's slender hope had gone now; Simon's face had killed it.

"He knows all. He must have been in her confidence, and have expected this. Mary has betrayed me to Simon; I'm utterly at his mercy; he could ruin me by a single word."

Thus he mused while Nell stood watching Simon's departing figure.

"Terence," she said after a pause, "I feel so ill and shaken, and so chilled with sitting there in the wet, that I hardly know how I shall get home; and you look quite unhinged yourself, dear?"

"Unhinged? My dear Nell, you must be bad indeed to talk such nonsense as that. Of course I was a trifle shaken at first—who wouldn't be? But that has all passed long ago; feel how steady my hand is. I wish you wouldn't talk at random like that. However, you're not well, dear, and I ought not to speak so crossly to you. Come on,

little wife, I'm as steady as a rock, and will carry you the whole way home if necessary. But first you must try and walk off the chill —come, be quick, dear, for you look perfectly frozen, and need a fast walk to restore your circulation."

CHAPTER V.

SOME two weeks had passed, and Chillington was still seething with the tragic death of Mary Pethick.

As to the cause of her death there was no room for serious doubt, no loophole for kind-hearted coroner's jurymen to ease their feelings by such phrases as "misadventure," "unsound mind," or anything else of a softening description. When, after a prolonged sitting, they took their hats and sticks from the parlour-table at Hollacomb Farm and clattered out of the room, they had passed the only verdict possible in face of the evidence, medical and other, laid before them.

It was the old, old story of wrong and shame, with the old miserable climax, and there was an end of it.

Dr. Clancy and his wife had not been called upon to give evidence. Mrs. Clancy, indeed, was ill in bed and unable to attend the inquest, and Simon Secretan was able to speak to the finding of the body, the position in which it lay, and other such details.

Mr. Secretan came in for a good deal of blame in that, knowing the girl's condition, and half-suspecting her to be contemplating suicide, he had taken no definite steps to prevent the catastrophe. He had always, however, possessed a special faculty for the accretion to himself of any blame that might be awaiting a pair of shoulders to settle upon.

But the coroner's verdict and subsequent funeral had not brought the subject to a natural close. Under ordinary circumstances the tide of public excitement would have turned at this point, ebbing gradually away

in casual gossips, regretful reminiscences, and denunciation of the girl's betrayer. In the present case, however, there was a special feature that served to keep public opinion almost at fever pitch; viz. that the author of the mischief remained undiscovered.

It seemed strange, even to the point of exasperation, that no one could put his finger upon the man for whom so much obloquy was ready and waiting. It was agreed that he must be a man of some position, as well as a specious rogue, for Mary never could bear to look at a common fellow. She had always held her head high; insomuch that few were surprised at her succumbing under the torture of her coming shame. Many said harsh things of her, and the voice of uncharity is always pitched high; but there was also a strong current of sympathizing regret, of kindly excuse for the good-hearted girl, who had always been liked in spite of her airs and whims. Verily, should the

culprit be discovered, he were in danger of rough handling; indeed, the guilty unknown was never mentioned by the young men of Chillington without some hard cursing and promises of heavy punishments. Terence Clancy had to listen to a score of such tirades during a single morning's rounds.

It was a tribute to Ezekiel Doidge that not a soul ever mentioned his name—though his arrogance had made an enemy of every second man in the place—in connection with the mystery. As for Dr. Clancy, they would as soon have thought of charging him with the ill-doing as of indicting the vicar himself. No one had seen him even speak to Mary, so cautious and circumspect had the dread of Ezekiel always made him.

Yet, after some days, the tongue of rumour began to busy itself—not openly, but in whispered conclaves behind parlour doors—with a name greater than that of Terence Clancy; one that ranked only second in

importance, from the town's point of view, to that of Lord Bridistow, the reigning peer of the district—with the name, in short, of the future Sir Simon Secretan. People were ashamed to speak in public against one of such blameless reputation and high position; but ugly whispers and innuendoes were crawling like serpents up and down the by-lanes of Chillington.

Terence knew that it was so, and the knowledge made his life a nightmare, while narrowing day by day the precipice-path which he seemed to be treading.

Simon, who must surely now be a deadly enemy, knew of his guilt. The single glance this once-friend had thrown at him while lifting the dead girl from Nell's knees was not to be misinterpreted. Yet, knowing the man as he did, Terence would have felt his secret almost safe—having the conviction that Simon might think fit to punish him in some private way, but would never betray him to

professional ruin—save only in one eventuality, the very one which seemed now drawing on; to wit the necessity of being compelled to clear his own character by pointing out the real offender.

Nor did the probability of public disgrace and professional ruin make up the sum of Terence's distraction at this time; for behind the fear of these lay a deeper one, that of a private avenger. There was Ezekiel Doidge to be reckoned with.

"I used to think he would do me some injury if he were even to catch me talking with Mary," thought Terence; "but now! . . . Let him find out the truth now, and I believe from the bottom of my soul that he'll murder me. I wish to God he was in the only place fit for him—a madhouse!"

Finally, by way of last straw to Terence's burden of anxiety, there was Nell's serious illness. She had caught a dangerous chill while lingering by the canal that night, and

the shock and strain to the nerves had aggravated it. Upon reaching home she had been put to bed, and had remained there ever since, nursed by Terence and her sister Kate, in a low feverish condition which alarmed her husband not a little.

Nor had Terence a single free hour wherein to sit down and fairly confront the tangled situation. Patients were pouring in upon the new doctor until he hardly knew which way to turn. He was overworked, distracted, harassed almost beyond human endurance. The strain was telling heavily upon his health already. He wondered how much longer he would be able to stand up under the pressure of accumulating trouble.

At length, about the middle of the third week after the inquest, Terence felt that he could no longer bear up without a word of advice or help from some human soul; and, further, that he must either think out some plan of escape from the increasing danger of

Simon's being forced to expose him, or collapse altogether. It was not in his nature to fight a thing through unpropped—with the grim fortitude that a man whose ways are at all crooked finds the need of sooner or later. Tell out his troubles he must; and he had good hope of at least moderating Simon's anger, if not of getting some help from him —could he but dare to face him.

Coming home from his rounds that day, he found Nell worse than usual, and with temperature dangerously high. Kate attended to him, as she had done lately, with sisterly kindness. She insisted upon his sitting down to dinner, vowing that he was over anxious about Nell's state; that she could remember her being in much the same low condition after a severe wetting on the moor some three or four years ago, and so on. Terence listened and was really grateful, but could eat nothing. He went up and sat with Nell for an hour, and was somewhat

relieved when she at length dropped off into a quiet sleep. Then he stole from the room, ordered the least tired of his two horses, and told Kate he was in for a long moorland ride. She begged him to send Mr. Syme. He said he had promised a patient to ride over himself, and go he must. He had made up his mind to face Simon, to throw himself upon the mercy of the most generous man he knew.

It was a relief to find himself in the saddle, with the prospect before him of putting an end to torturing suspense. While dreading the meeting with Simon, his fear was laced with hope that some definite good would come of it—perhaps even the respite or breathing-space for which he craved. Were Simon a person of but fair average magnanimity, the proposed appeal were but wasted breath. But Terence well knew the heart of the man who had been to him as a brother—was convinced that no appeal to

Simon could be looked upon as a mere forlorn hope. He had played the treacherous friend to him, yet hoped; had requited his exceeding generosity by robbing him, yet still hoped. Perhaps this hope of Terence Clancy's was as high a tribute as a man not yet much appreciated by his fellows could well have received.

Yet the exaltation produced by the mere hope of a respite was a measure of Clancy's wretchedness. His prospects were black and dreary as a winter's night; he was very near to despair. Even should the plan, now in his mind, of escape from the neighbourhood succeed, there was nothing to be looked for but grinding poverty—his old state—to be faced not alone this time, but with a delicately nurtured wife beside him, with her respect for him perhaps undermined, the spring of her love dried up. Terence felt the power that lay in this very wretchedness. He would lay bare his heart to Simon—

would borrow such eloquence from despair as had never come to him yet.

As soon as he had cleared the town and topped the hill above the railway station he drove the spurs into Rosalind and galloped forward like a madman.

"Throw me head foremost against the stone wall, mavourneen!" he cried, leaning over the mare's neck, "and maybe ye'll do me the greatest service in the power of horse or man. Break me neck, and the worry'd be over, dear; and sure ye'd finish off a worthless fellow who was born to ruin every one that loves him!"

Rosalind was presently pulled up, sweating and quivering, before the one alehouse owned by Monks Damerel hamlet. Terence turned in the saddle, uttering a long sigh of relief, when, upon raising his eyes to the great moorland ridge on his right, he saw a light twinkling.

"My beacon-light," he muttered, "that points to my only harbour of refuge."

The light shone from Simon's observatory, where, the night being moonless, with the winter stars throbbing brightly through the thinnest of mist, Terence had counted upon finding him. Cheered by the fulfilment of this expectation, Terence now got rid of his horse and at once entered upon the steep climb that lay before him.

The long, stiff ascent proved a more severe task than Terence had expected. The strain of much overwork and worry which he had lately undergone had so unfitted him for physical exertion that he toiled upwards with great difficulty, and had several times to throw himself at full length upon the damp heather in order to recruit his forces. It took him a full hour to reach the level of the observatory, and, when he at length found himself tapping at the door, he was in a thoroughly exhausted condition.

In fact, when Simon appeared, much amazed at receiving a visitor of any sort at

his solitary workshop, Terence was too evidently in a bad way for a humane man to think of anything but trying to assist him.

"Come in and sit down, Terence, while I get you some brandy and water."

Simon never thought to address him so familiarly, but the words came of their own accord.

Terence turned his head aside, saying not a word. The kindness of Simon's voice upset him; a harsher reception would have been more bracing, though less hopeful.

Simon threw open a cupboard and quickly set a glass of brandy and water on the table beside his visitor; but he, too, seemed unable to begin a conversation. It was a strange meeting.

By way of giving the other a few minutes in which to recover himself, Simon then went and stood at the open door, looking down over the coombe and the hamlet with its twinkling lights.

When he closed the door and turned again into the room, Terence began to speak in a low voice, his head still averted, his hands fumbling among the papers scattered on the table.

"You can guess that I'm pretty low, or I shouldn't have come to force myself upon you thus. I'm not quite mean enough to wish to flaunt my happiness in your face—if I had any; but, rather, I want to lay myself bare to you, to spread myself out before you. You're bound to judge me hardly; but—but will you hear my defence, such as it is?"

Secretan had wished to see no more of the man who had requited him so ill, never to listen to his soft persuasive voice again; but Terence's evident trouble and shame, his deliberate placing of himself as it were in the dock and appealing as prisoner to judge, wrought upon him strongly. He moved uneasily in his chair, then muttered—

"Go on; but don't look upon me as your judge."

Terence raised his head, looked fully at the other, and spoke on, with his heart in his voice—

"Jack Syme first put it into my head to cut you out, to win Nell and her money. I scouted the notion. I swear to you I had no thought of treachery when you first introduced me to her and took me up to Moor Gates. I was so free from any thought of wronging you that I had no fear for myself. You took me up there day after day, and still I never suspected myself. I don't know when the thought of love first came into my head; it crept into me, stole upon me unawares, had fast hold of me before I dreamed of anything to be fought against. Then I tried to shake myself free. I denied you many times, as you'll remember, when you wished to take me up there. But I was weak, and so drifted on and on; and that

fatal two weeks under the same roof with her were too much for me. The fever seized us both; I was not hero enough to resist, as you would have done."

The speaker was desperately in earnest. Simon knew well that he was telling the truth—at least, in so far as it is given a man to tell it when reviewing his own conduct and motives.

"As for Mary, you'll think me a common libertine, who compassed her ruin and never gave her a thought afterwards. That's what all Chillington will be saying of me soon. I don't know a soul but yourself who, once I'm found out, would endure to let me mention her name or say a word in my own defence. Even you can't understand my weakness; you never can conceive what a curse to a man this weakness is, how it scorches up every good intention like a flame. You're strong yourself; you want no props, nor woman's comfortings when things go wrong

with you. I'm made of poorer stuff, weaker stuff—baser stuff, if you will, than you, Simon. I fled to Mary for comfort in my trouble about Nell. Her flattery and admiration soothed a vain weak fool like me. I thought to love her truly, to forget Nell in her, to make her my wife. I meant well and did badly, and now my punishment is but half begun. But believe one thing of me—I never knew how things were; I never guessed her trouble; I never suspected it till I saw her lying dead by the canal, and wished myself dead beside her. Simon," he continued, leaping to his feet and stretching out both hands with a passionate gesture, "had I known all, I'd have gone back to her and made her my wife. I swear to you I'd have left Nell at the church door, ay, at the altar steps, rather than have brought shame and death on that poor girl!"

Terence sank back into his chair, and

bowed his head upon his hands; and Simon's voice was unsteady.

"I believe you, old fellow; you were always good hearted enough. I've judged you too hardly."

"O God, help me!" groaned Terence, miserably; "how shall I ever tell this to Nell? When she knows that even while I was making love to her—— Man, man, she'll hardly endure me in her presence—my bride, my sweet wife! I dread her scorn more than all the shame and ruin that are before me."

"Surely 'ruin' is too strong a word. It seems to me that in this mean world a man's vices tend rather to further his prospects than not. It is one's efforts to do good, to help and elevate others, that damn one in the estimation of one's neighbours. Look at me, there's not a more unpopular man in the county. Had I been a jolly rake, with an oath and a pint of liquor for every one,

they would have liked me long ago. Why," Simon added under his breath, "with a few redeeming touches of the blackguard about me, I might have won *her* love, or even my father's!"

This bitter speech, so curiously unlike his former self, showed whither Simon's solitary broodings were leading him. Terence was surprised to hear him, and shook his head decisively, saying—

"I see how it is. You've rushed from your old optimism into the opposite extreme, and both extremes are wrong. Among fast people, perhaps, in a great city, my errors might easily be forgiven, but here, never. Once I'm found out, no one will dare to employ me in the face of public opinion. My only hope is to sell your gift, the practice, before the storm breaks, and begin the struggle again at the other end of the kingdom, or, better still, in America. Yet, wherever I go, there'll be a black mark against

me. My sun has set, Simon; I can never hold up my head in the profession again. Mr. Tredethlyn will, I dare say, see that we don't starve; but that's as much help as I ever expect from him. But listen," he continued, in an anxious, husky voice, "there's only one man living that can help me—the one from whom I've the least right to hope for anything, yet the one from whom I hope everything—'tis yourself, Simon!"

"In the name of wonder, what can I do?"

"Listen! There's a whisper going up and down Chillington that *you* are the guilty man."

Simon sprang from his chair, laughing loud and discordantly.

"What! am I, then, in danger of becoming a popular character?" he shouted.

But Terence proceeded steadily, emphasizing each sentence with his hand.

"This insane hypothesis of theirs, which must have arisen from your being seen with

poor Mary, might keep them quiet for a few weeks—for long enough to permit of my agent in town getting something for the practice. Whereas, if the storm once broke, there would be no practice to sell; any medical man might come down and sweep the whole district at his will without the necessity of spending a penny. Yet my appeal lies on far stronger grounds than this. You know that Nell is ill in bed, so weak and feverish as to cause me serious anxiety? As it is, I fear for her life, Simon; but what would be her state were the story of my wrong-doing to be suddenly flung in her face now? I believe the shock would kill her outright. I'm certain that, even were she to survive it, her health would be shattered for many years. It drives me half mad to think how she will suffer. Oh, Simon, I have one death on my conscience already; for God's sake, don't let me have Nell's too! I've done ill, I deserve a heavy punishment, but must I lose *her?*

Give me a week or two; let me escape from this accursed place, and I'll give my whole life to working and scheming for her happiness, and sooner or later, whenever my courage returns to me, I will kneel to her and confess the wrong I did, and love will teach her how to forgive me. Help me, for her sake, Simon! I only dare to ask it for her sake!"

"Man, man, you only bewilder me! *What* do you ask?"

"*Your silence*—for a few days only—no more than that. Let the rumours against you run their course for a day or two; take no step to vindicate yourself. Tell them the truth the moment I'm gone—not till then."

"God's truth, man! would you have me silent if I'm accused outright?"

"For her sake—for her sake! Only for a day—week. After that, tell the worst of me. I'll leave a confession in writing that will clear you at once and for ever."

"I'll have nothing to do with such a cursed lie. I'll never be a party to my own dishonour!"

"Not a soul would dare to accuse you openly; you have only to let the gossipmongers mutter away for a few days. It is my only chance. But I see 'tis too much to ask of you, Simon; God knows I've no vestige of right to do so. I'm a poor miserable devil ruined by one false step; with none to help, no refuge to turn to; with nothing before me but public disgrace and the scorn of the woman I love. I'm too much of a wreck to be worth the trouble of rescuing, least of all by the friend whom I have injured. It's nothing that I meant no harm, that I'd have given my soul to save poor Mary, had I but known in time. I shall be posed before them all as a cold, deliberate, wicked libertine, who encouraged the girl to make an end of herself in order to get myself out of the difficulty. I shall be hooted and cursed

out of the place. Nell will never bear to live under the same roof with me; she'll go home to her father. Well, well, 'tis no use keeping you here all night listening to my raving. Maybe I'll drag on somehow, maybe I'll muster courage to cut it short with a dose of poison. Anyhow, I'll pester you no more. Give me another liquor, old fellow—'tis the last request I'll ever make of you."

Simon pushed over the decanter mechanically, then fell to striding to and fro, muttering to himself, "A horrible idea! to sit down and let them tear my character to pieces! Yet what do I care for any one's opinion? My father would suffer, were the evil report to get round to him. Yet, would he suffer? Wouldn't it be rather a satisfaction to him to find me even baser than he had imagined? I think it would pain Nell, yet not one-thousandth part as much as would the discovery of the true culprit. Not a soul here but would a dozen times rather hear ill of me than of

popular Terence. And it would be something to save Nell from this blow. With my help, the hardest thing that could well befall her might be averted. Once safely out of this place, *he* would manage to keep it from her; he has cunning enough for a shrewder task than that. Whom would it vex to hear of my fall? One or two would be sorry, the one or two who respect me, such as Frank Nelson, Bridistow, Julius Rush,—ah, and Kate. But she wouldn't believe it. I think she's the one living person that knows me well enough to say, ''Tis a lie!' And, at worst, the stigma could not rest upon me for many days." And so this Quixotic cynic went on brooding and arguing, seemingly unable to come to a decision either one way or the other.

Terence had the wisdom to sit silent while the mental struggle progressed, for he knew that were Simon really minded to take this, the most insane and reckless step of his life-

time, he would do so without further persuasion. And as the time went by the anxious watcher's hope grew to a certainty. He might have to wait long, perhaps for many hours, but something told him that, by the time he was again in the saddle, his point would have been gained, and Simon's promise given—the promise of one who had never learned to break his word.

CHAPTER VI.

PROBABLY there is nothing in the whole universe, material or spiritual, of elasticity so miraculous as a sanguine man's hope; nor would a year's search in a crowded land reveal a more naturally sanguine man than Terence Clancy.

When he descended to breakfast next morning half his mental clouds were dispersed; the sly gleam was returning to his eye, the vivid colour to his cheek.

"I hardly know you this morning," cried Kate as he shook hands with her. "And certainly I needn't ask after our patient?"

"She's better, Kate, much better; with pulse and temperature both approaching the normal. What a jolly bright morning it is, to be sure! I'll be riding round with a dry jacket to-day anyway."

He sat down to breakfast with a good appetite, and quickly inoculated Kate with his good spirits. None so cheery and charming as Terence in a good mood; none with a prettier knack of forestalling a woman's wants, giving her an impression that he is really thinking of her as well as himself—a habit which differentiates a man from the rest of his sex, and invests him with the kind of attraction that belongs to a white hare or a black swan.

To Kate, accustomed to Mr. Tredethlyn's digestive woes and bland indifference to the world outside his own waistcoat, her brother-in-law's thoughtful little gallantries appealed strongly this morning. She was beginning reluctantly to admit that Nell's

infatuation for this man was not so blankly incomprehensible after all.

"As Nell is really better, I must send a line over to my father; and I shall ask him to pass on the good news to Simon, who will doubtless have heard of, and been anxious about, her illness."

So said Kate, who was well aware that Simon's name was tabooed at the White House, but who always made a point of ignoring the whims and weaknesses of other people. She was now surprised, however, by Terence's cordial acceptance of her proposition.

"Certainly, certainly; Simon should be told of our patient's improvement. What a fine old fellow he is, old Simon! I wish, Kate, I do wish," he added with feeling, "that my happiness had been won at some enemy's expense, instead of good old Simon's."

It was the first time Kate had heard him

speak in this strain, and it warmed her heart yet more towards Terence.

He continued to speak kindly and admiringly of Simon, for it eased his conscience somewhat to do so; to eulogize his benefactor seemed to lighten the burden of his obligation in some measure. What did he not owe to this good friend? Simon had last night given his word to be silent for a month—one whole month. In four weeks a dozen opportunities might arise. The hue and cry might die out ere long in the ordinary course of things, and meanwhile its energy would be expended in a wrong direction.

Terence recalled with comfort the story of Alcibiades and his dog. How the astute Greek had cut his favourite animal's tail to the end that his enemies, having a small thing to fasten upon, might fail to notice large ones. Chillington, he thought, in hot pursuit of Simon Secretan, would never

dream of thinking about himself. They had not merely a small thing to occupy their eager tongues, but a stately quarry to hunt down. As to whether the quarry might suffer in the chase, why that was an awkward question. But—but Simon was known for a very proud man; doubtless he would keep aloof and scorn backbiters. And again, the hue and cry could not possibly last long. Some other scandal would certainly crop up in due course; in fine, Terence had serious hopes that he would after all be able to retain his practice and his position, and continue to show a bold front to the world.

Yet there was one dark cloud yet undispersed — the dread of Ezekiel Doidge. Terence felt that this man would now become little better than a monomaniac, that his one object in life would be to find out and bitterly punish his sweetheart's betrayer. That he was seemingly quiet now, going

about his business as usual, keeping his schemes, if he had any, to himself, rather added to Terence's alarm. Doidge was the one person he really feared, the only one who would persist when public opinion had cooled down, and ceased to trouble itself about a victim.

The question of how to hoodwink this dangerous foe was occupying Terence as he strolled to and fro under his verandah after breakfast, when a maid approached him with this message—

"There's some one a-waitin' for you in the consultin'-room, sir. Mr. Doidge, from Chillington Mill."

In a moment a fresh brood of fears swept down upon Terence and staggered him.

"Let him take a seat, and I will come immediately." He got these few words out with difficulty.

The maid noticed his pallid looks, but put

them down to anxiety about her mistress. She and the cook had been but three days in the house, yet both were already under the spell of Terence's fascination. It was his lot to be loved almost at sight by men, women, and children alike.

The moment Jane disappeared, Terence entered by the French window, and sat down in the breakfast-room to recover himself. But his sickness of heart resisted all argument. He was in deadly fear. He could not persuade himself but that Doidge had come to denounce him—or worse.

Finding that delay only helped to unman him, he went palpitating down the stairs, and hovered palpitating outside the consulting-room door.

"He may have chanced upon some clue," his white lips muttered. "He may be violent—he may kill me before I can summon help. I will never face him unarmed again, if—if I but come safely off this time."

At that moment, Jack Symes's noisy whistle came down the passage from the surgery, and Terence could have asked no sweeter music. It nerved him to turn the handle and face his enemy.

Doidge's friendly greeting brought such a revulsion of feeling, that Terence's brain whirled. At first he could hardly tell what the man said or how he looked.

"Lord bless me, sir, I reckon you're as much in want of medicine as I be!"

"I've been overworked lately, Mr. Doidge, and have had little sleep—and my wife's illness has made me anxious."

"I hope she'm better, doctor?"

"Thanks, yes; Mrs. Clancy is much better this morning."

"That's well; us'd be terrible sorry if she was to be laid up for long."

"You are very good. But about yourself—you've come to consult me?"

Terence could now venture upon a good

look at his patient; he liked what he saw but little.

Doidge had the strained look that speaks to "the perilous stuff that weighs upon the heart." His pale face was a little flushed, his cheeks deeply sunken; his eyes looked strange, with a gleam of dry fierce triumph in them, a kind of haggard joy, as of a worn-out man who draws near to a wished-for goal.

The doctor quickly gathered that the man's nervous system was thoroughly unhinged, and his mind in much the same condition. While examining him physically, he held his patient in conversation without difficulty; indeed, poor Doidge was too much excited to support silence, had it been desired.

His talk was chiefly of the gathering to be held in the town hall next evening for the purpose of inaugurating the new cricket club. From that subject he seemed unable to disentangle his mind for a moment.

This concentration of his thoughts upon a subject that could hardly possess much innate interest for him—seeing that his offer of a piece of meadow land had some time since been refused by the embryo club in favour of Mr. Secretan's proferred site, and that the club was in fact a creation of Simon's —was somewhat strange. It might have alarmed Terence, had not his thoughts for the present been strongly drawn in another direction. But for the moment he was all medical man; there were points in this patient's physical condition that puzzled him. Allowing for the man's morbid mental state, for the severe emotional strain lately put upon him, for some constitutional weakness easily discernible, there remained an unaccountable something, a dark corner in which Terence's subtle mind was at present blindly groping.

From student days Clancy had always shown a marked talent for diagnosis. A

famous physician, under whom he had been fortunate enough to serve at St. Bartholomew's, had once said to him: "As far as talent goes, you have the promise of a career before you. You possess a rare faculty of sound analysis, combined with keen intuitive perception—the man's gift wedded to the woman's. But, remember, talent without *character* is a haftless blade; stiffen your character, youngster; brace your will to face the first ten years of drudgery, and you'll one day be a great physician."

Terence's double talent was hard at work now. Intuition had leaped at something, and was now waiting for analysis to prove foot by foot the ground which had been cleared at a bound.

"You're a hard-exercise man, I believe, Mr. Doidge?" asked the doctor in a conversational way, as he withdrew the stethoscope. Do you over-exert yourself sometimes?"

"Are you talking of exercise? Well, yes, I'm not exactly a loafer. But I haven't had my strength for some time; can't throw the sacks about and shame they lazy hounds o' mine as I used sometimes."

"I wouldn't overtask myself, if I were you. You're a bit out of sorts just now —nerves out of order, and that sort of thing. You should rest and avoid all excitement for a week or two. I'll send you a nerve sedative, and other medicine to follow."

"Psha! as if I didn't know all that," cried Doidge, rudely. "The very thing I've come here for is to be wound up for to-morrow evening. I want to sleep to-night for an hour or two, just for a change, and get fit for—what I have to do."

Clancy's mind swung back suddenly from far-reaching vistas of speculation to the plain hard ground of personal interest and safety. His fears were alert again in a moment.

What did this man mean by his—"what I have to do?"

"Give me something to screw me up," cried the patient in a peremptory tone. "I'm all of a shake, and there's a stiff job before me."

"Drop it, whatsoever it be; you're not fit for any excitement."

"I will be fit; if you can't give me a screw-up, damme, I'll go to another doctor!"

"Go where you please, my good fellow; every honest doctor would give you a similar warning."

"You'm right, sir; you'm right. I'm all unhinged-like, you mustn't heed what I say. Will you give me a sleeping-draught o' some sort? I *must* sleep to-night, for I'm bound to be present at the cricket meetin'. My heart's set on that, for there's work for me to do. More than that I won't say at present—and I reckon you'll be in the hall yourself, doctor? The whole place 'll be there,

you see, and pretty nigh the whole neighbourhood, too, from Lord Bridistow down to the smallest farmer. They say this will be the crack club o' the county, and perhaps give a big lift to county cricket. Yes, the whole district will be gathered in our town hall to-morrow night, mister,—and I'll be among them, if I have to be carried there on a shutter!"

This speech sounded a fresh clang of alarm for Terence. Was it, then, just as he had feared? Was this wretched man actually brewing some scheme of vengeance, hugging it close, so as to hit the harder when he did speak? Clancy was absolutely in the dark as to what clue, or fancied clue, the crazy fellow possessed; he might turn and rend any one. It was only clear that he was upon a wrong scent at present.

After some further desultory conversation, Doidge left the house abruptly, jumped into his high-wheeled gig, and drove furiously

away. From the west window of his consulting-room, Terence watched him rattle down the steep hill to the town at break-neck speed.

"No hope of that," muttered the watcher with dry lips. "No hope of his coming to smash, I suppose? Fate will be careful to preserve him as an instrument of torture for a poor devil like me, who never gets a chance of going straight!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE town hall of Chillington was an ancient granite structure supported upon arches, having on one side of it the market-place, on the other a broad open space of gravel. As you came down the steep hill leading from the railway station, and paused on the bridge for a patronizing glance at the little town, the old hall made a good note in the picture; being well in accord as regards size, style, and colour, with its surroundings. A stranger of moderate enthusiasm might quite well venture to pronounce it "respectable," and the townsfolk would be much chagrined at so lukewarm a verdict.

The uses and functions of the building were manifold. It would serve as a concert-room for the Amateur Musical Society one night, for a religious gathering the next; for a public sale in the afternoon, a private ball in the evening. Every one with any pretensions to be a public character had stumbled through a few halting sentences in the big room over the pillars; indeed, its stage had been trodden by the shivering amateurs, musical, dramatic and other, of several generations. Of the well-known voices uplifted from time to time in the town hall, none was more popular with an audience than Mr. Tredethlyn's. Standing upon this familiar platform, with a Chillington gathering spread out before him in one broad smile, the squire-parson was at his best. He was trammelled neither by Mr. Secretan's intensity, nor the vicar's nervousness, nor Lord Bridistow's dearth of words; so that every one used to go away the more

cheerful for his sly jokes and genial home-thrusts, that gave each in turn the laugh over his neighbour. And the excitement of public speaking always had a good effect upon his liver.

Mr. Tredethlyn, as it happened, was to be the principal speaker at the cricket meeting mentioned in the last chapter. He was to publicly accept, on behalf of the committee, Mr. Secretan's gift of a cricket-ground; gracefully thank Mr. Doidge for his equally kind offer, with a neat side glance or two at the fine public spirit so often exhibited by him; and afterwards to praise and thank every one who expected it—that is to say, every one who had moved hand, foot, or tongue in the interests of the embryo club. A man needs a good deal of simplicity, or good nature, or hypocrisy—or perhaps all three in combination—to spread individual praise in this lavish manner, while at the same time tick-

ling the vanity of an entire audience, and keeping up his own dignity; but our parson was quite equal to the task assigned him by the universal voice of the district.

To suit this important occasion the hall had been arranged in a special fashion. As the gathering was to be of a friendly, rather than formal character, and as it was thought advisable to allow a certain amount of free discussion among the audience, the chairman was placed, together with his green baize table and bell, about the centre of one side of the long room; while the platform was left unoccupied—an arrangement which put every man on the same level, and tended to promote good-fellowship.

On the chairman's right and left were seated Lord Bridistow, the vicar, Mr. Secretan, and half a dozen other members of the committee; before him was another green table ringed with newspaper reporters, while the remainder of the room was packed

with the densest throng that had ever been squeezed into the place. For farm-carts, gigs, and carriages of every description had been streaming into the town for so many hours, that by this time quite a large area of country must have drained itself into Chillington town.

In fact the inauguration of this new club was an event of prodigious importance, owing partly to the great prowess this year of the county eleven, to which the town furnished a brace of crack bowlers, and the consequent spread of cricketing fervour. Even the ladies had been bitten by the prevailing mania, and clusters of them were now hanging over the flag-trimmed front of the gallery. They had covered the unoccupied platform with flowers, and caused the walls to bloom with such a crop of mottoes, devices, and decorations as the emotional condition of the neighbourhood seemed to demand. Had the conventional

intelligent foreigner been among them as they gazed upon the thickening throng beneath, he would doubtless have assumed that some question of vast national importance was about to be broached.

When Mr. Tredethlyn's figure rose to its height, and his comely face beamed a welcome to this great audience, the buzzing murmurs ceased. No need for any tapping upon tables or appeals for silence, for every man felt that he was about to hear just what he would have said himself—had he possessed the knack of speaking.

Kate Tredethlyn, looking down at her father—she had left Nell in charge of a friend at her earnest entreaty—felt proud of him as the smooth, strong current of his speech began to flow. His periods had the ease and quietude of perfect self-confidence, his grip of his hearers was both immediate and firm. When he ceased, they all felt that the proceedings had opened perfectly,

the right note had been struck. There was warm applause.

As the chairman had encouraged free discussion of one or two moot points, there then followed a desultory debate, with fragmentary speeches put forth here and there by mumbling old men or stammering young gentlemen.

When this had progressed for some time without much advancement of business, Lord Bridistow rose on the chairman's right hand, and plunged with characteristic abruptness into speaking.

His lordship was a square, bluff, ruddy-faced man, much respected not only as the chief magnate of the neighbourhood, but as a practical common-sense landlord who lived on his estate, and managed it better than most men. He never pampered his tenants into discontent, as Simon had done long ago, and irretrievably; nor fell into an opposite extreme of severity. There was much sound

judgment about Lord Bridistow, though no living soul had ever called him clever. Indeed he exhibited so few intellectual symptoms that Mrs. French-Chichester—who was nevertheless well-pleased to have him as an ornament to her drawing-room as often as might be—used to say that the taking of his pass degree at Oxford had exhausted his brain for ever.

"The soil of his mind!" she would exclaim, when people praised his farming; "need never trouble him much; it brought forth just once—but there'll be no rotation of crops *there* anyway."

"Mr. Chairman, and gentlemen," began his lordship—"and perhaps I might add, ladies—only the latter can hardly be said to be among us just now; in fact are quite above our heads, as they're apt to be on most occasions." (Here there was a loud roar from the crowd, with whom a small joke went a long way.) "Your eloquent

chairman has just put everything before you in such a—er—what-d'ye-call-'em manner that there isn't much left for me to say. But, judging from your enthusiasm to-night, I should imagine the club has a long life before it. You all know what laurels our noble county has been plucking—er—I mean reaping this last season—and I think we're mighty proud of our little contribution to the team—our two bowlers." (Tremendous cheering here.) "There's Dick Yelverton, now, has covered us with glory." (Here Yelverton, a sheepish young fellow seated in the front row, was suffused with blushes, and searched the floor for an opening to dive through.) "I'm bound to praise his skill myself; for when he bowled to me at a net last summer, he took my wicket three times in five balls—and that in my own park, too; his break from the leg broke me altogether."

Lord Bridistow stopped to chuckle here;

he liked this joke even better than the other, and felt that he had justified his cordial reception.

"However, I'm getting outside my brief now, and must return to business. What I should be speaking of is the captaincy of the new club. You've chosen your committee, decided how often they are to meet —capital fun it is, mapping out other people's tasks, eh?—settled the conditions of membership, and all that; but as yet there has been no mention made of your *captain*——"

"Yourself, my lord! Us would like 'ee for captain right well!" cried several ardent spirits from different parts of the room.

"Myself?—no; couldn't be done, my good fellows; couldn't be done at any price. I live too far off; and there's my own village club to be looked after. I'll name the right man for you in a minute—but of course I'm doing everything topsy-turvy. We haven't even formally accepted

Mr. Secretan's offer of a cricket-ground yet; but, as we all have sense enough to accept a present when it falls in our way, that's soon done. Mr. Chairman, shall we have a show of hands?"

Mr. Tredethlyn rose again.

"All you who agree to accept Mr. Secretan's offer, hold up your hands."

The room forthwith sprouted with uplifted arms and hands, but there was no attempt at a cheer—not a voice was raised in friendliness or gratitude.

Lord Bridistow, still on his feet, looked uncomfortable and hesitated. He had expected, as a matter of course, some enthusiasm at this point, something to give promise of a cordial vote of thanks, such as he was now about to move. It had not occurred to him that a good fellow like Secretan, for whom he himself had a great liking and respect, and with whose efforts for the public weal he had always been in

sympathy, could be other than popular. Nor, indeed, was it in his power to comprehend that inscrutable phenomenon, popularity—a receipt for whose production is upon every man's lips, but within hardly any man's knowledge.

It was not the viscount's habit, however, to shirk a duty, pleasant or the contrary; and his temper was somewhat ruffled at the marked ingratitude of Chillington. He proceeded in a voice somewhat firmer and louder than before—

"I think, gentlemen, we may be apt to take this gift of a good-sized piece of land too much as a matter of course. I, for one, feel on behalf of the town and district particularly grateful for Mr. Secretan's generous present. I have a great admiration for his public spirit. I've known him as a friend for some years, and he's about the only man of my acquaintance who does honestly care about the good of other people. The rest

of us get beyond number one when duty calls pretty loud: never without that summons—and always with the expectation of a good solid return of praise and thanks. If we get no real gratitude, by Jove, we thump and hammer till people pretend a little! That's what I do. Virtue may be its own reward, but that's not good enough for me. Well, now, before moving a cordial vote of thanks to Mr. Secretan, I'm going first to propose him as the most fit, proper, and efficient captain the Chillington Cricket Club could possibly possess—and may we prevail upon him to accept the post!"

At this point Simon rose and coldly asked to be allowed to say a few words. Kate, looking down anxiously from the gallery, knew well what their tenour would be. She understood this proud-humble gentleman better than any one in that crowded room; perhaps she was the only person who understood him at all. Simon would deprecate

any thanks for his trifling gift, and flatly refuse the honour of the captaincy.

But Simon was not destined to make even this brief speech; for as he stood looking somewhat haughtily over the heads of his audience, some one on his right also arose, and making his way along the front of the crowd, took up a position beside the reporters' table. It was Ezekiel Doidge.

There was a profound hush in the large hall, for, though the townsfolk were well accustomed to seeing Doidge constantly on his legs at Local Board meetings and the like, objecting, interfering, browbeating everybody, it was felt that something strange was about to happen now; nor could any fail to perceive that the pale stern man who leaned upon the long table was striving to master some stronger passion than any question of this evening could possibly have aroused.

Kate Tredethlyn and several other ladies,

wondering at the oppressive silence that had befallen the assembly, craned their necks nervously over the front of the gallery. The chairman and his immediate neighbours drew their heads together, asking each other in whispers what this peculiar silence might mean. Secretan, after a casual glance at Doidge, re-seated himself with the indifferent air of one who cares little about the proceedings one way or the other. Then Doidge's low voice fell hot and quivering upon the silence.

"I suppose I ought to apologize for troubling this large gathering with a personal matter; yet you'll presently see that 'tis a public matter, too, and let no man hinder me, for what I have to say I will say. I'm goin' to speak o' her that was my betrothed wife. But, understand me, I'm not here to stir you up about her sad fate, but only to set before you, as fair as I can, what I know about it, what I haven't yet whispered to a

livin' soul. I've kept the secret until this moment because I think my accusation should be set forth in public, answered in public,—if any answer there be. I shall make no statement that I wouldn't repeat on oath afore a court o' justice; and as the law o' the land cares naught for the crime that I'm goin' to speak of, I look upon you, my fellow-townsmen and neighbours, as constitutin' the only available tribunal. I shall bear myself afore you, as afore a real court, solemnly conscious o' the weight o' the accusation I bring."

The speaker paused for a moment, for self-control grew more difficult as he felt the heart of the large audience beginning to beat with his own. He had spoken slowly, with the strained deliberation of a strong-willed man mastering strong passion, but the heart-flame which underlay his quiet words was spreading through his listeners. Every pair of eyes was glued to the pale working face

of the man who seemed to be looking beyond them.

"When it was first borne in upon me," Ezekiel resumed in a voice even lower than before, but which reached all ears, "that she wished to be free, I suspected that some gentleman had been tamperin' with my girl. She—the woman I loved—was true and loyal by natur'; only the subtle flattery of some one above her—with a kind o' claim in her eyes to be as her conscience, to know right an' wrong better than herself, could have wore away her faithfulness. I felt that. I knew as no light temptation could have twisted her so, and I taxed her wi' the name o' the only gentleman that she ever saw much of, and she admitted havin' a weakness towards him. She let me believe—and she always spoke true, always true—as this gentleman had won her heart from me. An' I freed her; resolvin' to watch over and guard her from the danger that I saw ahead.

But I failed in the duty I had set myself. Mayhap, a more vigilant guardian might have saved her from ruin; but there was no mother to watch over her, only a jealous fool—a self-confident jealous fool, who neglected even to warn her father and friends. Well, when she went off to Lymport on a visit, away from home and danger, I breathed free again; but she only answered one o' my letters—and that answer scared me.

"I was gettin' so anxious that, on her return from Lymport, I followed Mary and saw *him* meet her by the canal bridge below Hollacomb Farm. . . . Happen you'll say that I jumped at his guilt too soon, but presently I'm goin' to read you his condemnation writ in her own hand. . . . I'll hurry over what remains to be said. How did I come to be possessed of the letter? I'll tell you that—then read it if I can. After that interview by the canal I scarce left her unwatched an hour; I was always prowlin'

about the woods near the farm—and *he* met her most every day. I covered him with my gun once and again—and God knows why I didn't draw trigger. . . . Well, on the mornin' o' the big flood I was called away up-stream to save some drowin' cattle, and overdid myself over the job, so that I had to bide quiet at home, and couldn't get to use my legs again till the evenin'. Then, by the time I had got half-way down to my usual beat in the Hollacomb woods, young Bob Pethick,—that's Mary's cousin, who used mostly to run her messages for her—met me with this letter. He had been in my pay since her return, and was under orders to bring me at once every scrap of writin' that she might entrust to him. Two or three times he had been to my place with the note, and each time found me out. It was directed to *him*—and—and here it is in my hand now. . . ."

A deep thrill passed through the crowd as

Doidge tried to steady the fluttering hand which held the paper. The severe strain under which he was labouring oppressed them strangely; but his will still held good, his voice was still steady enough to be heard throughout the hall as he read—

"I thought and hoped never to forgive you—but I could not live hating you. To make excuses for you was my only comfort; and once I gave way to that, allowed myself to think that only Fate had parted us, and that you sometimes grieved for me, I could live over again the happy time when you loved me. But, my love, my love, I can bear it no longer—I cannot face what is now before me. I have no strength left to bear it, and so I send you these last words—and with them my forgiveness. The kind old canal—my old, old friend—will bear me away to the river, and the river to the sea, and none will know my true story. My father and aunts will be spared that, and poor Ezekiel, too. I think it would half kill *him* to know the worst of me; and he would be a dangerous enemy to you. But have no fears. I have destroyed every scrap of your handwriting, every trifle that could compromise you; and, lastly, I have so arranged things that my death will seem an accident. My lost love, there will be no breath upon your dear name—it will never be coupled with mine, for

none can read what is only written upon my heart. Farewell, my love, my dear love. Grieve for me a little —oh, let me think you will grieve for me a little!"

Ezekiel's voice was harsh and broken for the last few sentences, and he clung to the table for support. Then he straightened himself suddenly and turned upon Secretan, crying with a snarl like a savage beast's, "*Take your letter—it is yours!*"—and fell senseless upon the floor.

Many had expected to see him fall, it being obvious that the man was labouring with a task beyond his strength. He was lifted and carried into the air without a moment's delay. The throng turned towards him but for a moment as he was carried past, their mental faculties being concentrated upon the gentleman whose arraignment had thus passed suddenly from the stage of whispering in back streets to open denouncement before a public assembly.

"Now, Simon—now!" whispered Kate

Tredethlyn between her clenched teeth. "Now stand up and throw back this miserable lie in their faces. Quick—quick! Some of them believe it!"

She uttered a sigh of relief as Simon sprang to his feet with the words she looked for written clear on his face. He seemed to have been stunned for a moment, but now uprose, his whole figure dilating with the hot wrath of an honourable man falsely accused. Kate panted with anxiety when his hand went out as though to make way for burning words to follow. The next moment she was faint and sick with disappointment.

Simon's eyes, challenging his audience as though daring some one to meet them, lighted upon another pair of eyes, full of piteous appeal, and a white drawn face upturned to his—the face of the man who had but the other night won his promise of silence. It was the direst moment of

Simon's life. He might live to ten times man's allotted span and never know such another. The remembrance of the promise went through him like a rod of white-hot iron. He could not break it; it was not in him to break his word solemnly plighted. He was scorched, burnt up with shame, but forced by the bitter strength of his honour to stand dumbly staring, as the murmurs around him grew to jeers, and angry scorn leaped into all faces.

"Speak, old fellow, for God's sake, and silence them!" cried Lord Bridistow's voice behind him.

But not a word came. Simon stood rigidly facing the storm of denunciation with ghastly looks that seemed an admission of his guilt.

Jack Syme, leaving Doidge in charge of another doctor, re-entered the room at this moment, and took in the situation with a gloating eye. So complete a triumph over

his enemy as this was far above the level of his expectation.

"Gentlemen," he cried in a strong firm voice edged with sarcasm, "your intended captain appears to have no answer to make to this accusation. Perhaps he is too proud to speak—too superior to the common herd of us to care about vindicating himself. If so, I believe I shall only give voice to the general sense of this great assembly if I ask him to step down to our level for a moment and speak his mind. He is accused not only of wronging this girl, but of egging her on to make away with herself in order to screen him, or at any rate of taking no steps to prevent such a climax. I shouldn't myself care to keep silence under this double indictment; and I think even a gentleman in his high position might condescend to a word or two of explanation. From a man who poses not only as a public benefactor, but as a mender of public morals, we

assuredly have a right to expect something better than haughty silence."

This brief speech was received with loud applause. There was a closing in upon the spot where Simon stood, and not a few threatening gestures from those near him.

The threats and upraised hands energized Simon in a moment. He struck his fist upon the table in a spasm of fury, crying aloud—

"I have nothing to say. Take that for an answer, you curs—you curs! Make way for me there!"

They fell back from him right and left as he strode to the door; and not until his eyes were off them did the storm of hisses and jeers break forth again.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE proceedings at the town hall that night made a deep and lasting impression upon Simon. The obloquy he had undergone submerged his mind in bitterness, until all its qualities save one were obliterated, like the details of a flooded landscape. There seemed to be nothing of him left standing but his pride. He felt that he was made up of pride and nothing else, as a man with a deep wound seems made up of pain.

The sting of Doidge's accusation was lost in the deeper pang caused by the immediate public acceptance of his guilt. This was the "quick of the ulcer"—the consciousness

that his friends and neighbours, whom for years he had been endeavouring to benefit, should be ready at a moment's notice to put him down not only as a heartless libertine of the conventional type, but as a hypocrite whose whole outward life was a lie. He knew nothing of the creeping rumours that had been eating away his good name lately; and he was too hard stricken to appraise judicially the crushing weight of evidence that had been brought against him. As for the direction of Mary's farewell letter to himself, that was easily explained. He had offered to forward any communication she might wish to make to Terence, and had acquiesced in her suggested precaution that Terence's name should appear nowhere in the epistle or its address. For that damning piece of evidence he might thank his own careless good nature. But Mary's treacherous tampering with his name to Ezekiel—for no one who listened to the man could

believe that he was speaking other than the truth as to this—was a piece of meanness which Simon could only add to his general indictment against human nature.

He felt now that he could turn nowhither for justice or even common kindness. The tradesmen and farmers with whom he had dealt so long, the friends whose hands had clasped his a hundred times, were all alike eager to condemn him. Had he spent a lifetime in building up the reputation of a graceless blackguard, they could not have been more speedy or unanimous. He had noticed satisfaction at his disgrace upon many faces. He believed that when his contract with Terence should have been fulfilled, when the real culprit had departed, having confessed the truth in writing, these eager detractors would regret the necessity of admitting his innocence. Such was the natural attitude of a mind thrown out of poise by this unexpected blow.

All the next day Simon spent up in his observatory or striding over the moor, nursing his wrath and drugging his sick pride with cynical aphorisms. In order to be independent and uninterrupted he took food enough with him to last till nightfall, and the moment he returned from tramping the moorland, locked himself into the observatory, resolving to be deaf to all knocking.

But no one came near him; and though it accorded exactly with both wish and expectation, this desertion by his friends aggravated his bitterness. As the long day wore on and never a knock made itself heard, his heart was like lead. He passed from hot indignation to sullen brooding. Terence, at least, might surely have come to thank the man who was suffering in his stead. So he said to himself; yet instinct whispered that Terence would certainly avoid him like poison, would slink about dreading to meet

him at every turn, fearing—even after last night's proof of good faith—lest he should repudiate his quixotic bargain.

"Terence is nothing but a poor craven," he mused, "and not for a moment worth the sacrifice. But then—there's Nell."

He fell to reflecting on Nell's future. Terence was right; last night's experience had fully justified his forecast as to the professional ruin which discovery must bring upon him in this neighbourhood. And to a man of his poor fibre this must mean, as Simon clearly perceived, life-ruin also. Terence had none of the stiffness necessary for a stand-up fight with adversity. Were the practice to leave him, and with it all chance of buying another, he would become the mere plaything of Fortune, sink lower and lower, until he reached the dregs of society. And Nell must needs share his degradation.

Simon perceived now, however, with the

clearness which is so apt to come just too late, that his promise was an act of almost criminal generosity. He should have furnished Terence with a large sum of money rather than have consented to this insane, dishonourable silence. But Terence had wrought upon Simon by his fatal persuasive faculty, and used Nell as a lever for the upsetting of his judgment. There remained only for Simon to break his word—in other words, to cease to be himself—or to lie upon the bed prepared by his own folly. "Terence will dun me for money at the end of the month, anyway," he concluded with a hard laugh.

But one day's hiding of his head was enough for Simon. Pride and obstinacy alike demanded that there should be no skulking from the public view. He made up his mind to ride about as usual, look all men in the face, and dare them to accuse him. This course seemed not only an easy, but a com-

forting one, as the most heroic line of conduct always seems, until tried.

To-morrow was market day at Chillington, and everybody would be abroad. Here was just the opportunity his present mood craved for showing his high scorn of these false accusers. And perchance — this thought underpropped his harder ones—there would be found some few loyal enough to come forward and show that they believed in him still.

Next morning, his reckless, heroical mood still holding good, Simon proceeded to carry his promising plan into execution. Having breakfasted and received Mrs. Henley's morning report of Sir Hamo's health, he buckled on his proof-armour of pride, mounted his tall bay, Philanthropy, and headed him northwards. And probably no haughtier-looking gentleman had ever ridden along the ancient road to Chillington; for Simon's bitterness, finding its way to his face, seemed to have limned it anew with a harsh hand.

Upon reaching Chillington bridge, he found himself among the accustomed group of loungers, and treated them one and all to a fierce glare. Ordinarily there would have been a general touching of hats, and one or two would have come forward with the morning's news. Not a finger was lifted on this occasion.

Naturally their principal topic to-day had been Mr. Secretan's disgrace, and the man who had handled it with keenest relish was now hanging over the bridge parapet with nervous unconcern. Another man jerked his thumb towards the horseman, cocked his hat rakishly, and grinned broadly at his friends. The bolder spirits grinned back, others shuffled awkwardly with their feet; not a word of greeting was offered, good or bad.

Already the man who had come here expressly to show how little he cared, was suffering keenly; in fact, the sensitive, thin-

skinned Simon had undertaken a task for which the possession of a bull's hide was the first essential. But if his nerves were quivering, his obstinacy was firm as a rock; he would rather die than turn back now.

He rode on into the High Street, where the very stones seemed to cry shame upon him. It was crowded with familiar faces, and his disgrace was written upon every one. Each particular glance he met carried its own special pang. Men stopped to point him out to their neighbours; tradesmen came to shop doors to gaze at the brazen wrong-doer. No man addressed him, but women talked of him to each other in quasi-audible tones. He heard the town's opinion of him at every stride of his horse. The very air seemed to scorch him. Those who hated Simon might well be jubilant this morning. But no one gave him the opening for which he was panting by the time he had got halfway up the street; nor would any

man meet the challenge of his eyes. Twice up and down the High Street he rode at a foot's pace, until his heart was sobbing and a rushing sound was filling his ears. Then he dismounted, giving his horse to he knew not whom, and drifted through the archway into the market-place, too much stunned to know whither he was going; and here his distress was destined to reach a climax.

The market-place consisted of an inner covered portion, under which all the neighbourhood's traffic, in poultry, eggs, fish, coloured handkerchiefs, cheap millinery, and a score of other things, was concentrated once a week, and an outer open space, where were the permanent stalls of butchers and other tradesmen of the town. Up till noon on market-day the central part would always be packed close with a chaffering throng, which fringed away into thinner groups through four arched openings.

It so happened that the butter-and-cream

stall, just within the archway through which Simon entered, was to-day in charge of the Mrs. Parminter whose flooded cottage we saw him disencumbering of furniture on the day of the great flood. This redoubtable woman had since then been living with a sister, whom, after an acrid silence of some years, she had found it convenient to propitiate. But it was a hard thing thus to eat humble-pie to a sister much better off than herself, and Mrs. Parminter had not forgotten to whom she owed the necessity. Against this gentleman, this future baronet, who, under pretence of charity, thrust people into hovels only built to catch the floods, she entertained a grudge such as only a professional shrew can hope to build up. And she now saw him approaching from under the archway, walking unsteadily, looking dazed and bewildered. No wonder the woman panted with triumph, while her hard-lined face was puckered with a malignant grin.

As Simon drifted vaguely past the stall, a sudden torrent of vituperation swept down upon him. The High Street had taunted him mainly with quiet sneers tossed over shoulders, or had scowled at him in silence, the small boys alone venturing to follow him with cries of "Who killed Mary Pethick?" But now all the scorn and wrath of Chillington was pouring from Mrs. Parminter's tongue with the vehemence of a flooded mill-race. No mealy words made up the torrent, but the coarsest and crudest to be found in the store of a coarse woman, so that in that stream of foul abuse poor Mary's name was like a white blossom carried along by a sewer.

A crowd soon collected round Simon and his accuser, and other tongues were loosed.

Simon was no longer master of himself, hardly even conscious of what he was doing, until, right before him, emerging from the threatening crush, he perceived that for which

his soul craved—a man as tall and powerful as himself menacing him with a heavy whip.

It was a young farmer named Fry, a former lover of Mary's, and the moment he was within reach, he slashed Simon across the face with the whip.

When Simon struck him back, those who heard the heavy farmer fall thought he would never rise more. Then the women were thrust aside, and the men fell upon Mary's supposed seducer.

But there were many present who would not quietly allow one man to be mauled by a dozen; the brawl at once became general. In a twinkling the stall was smashed to fragments, the corner of the market was a hurtling mass of arms and fists and sticks, of heavy breathings and straining bodies. A short but savage brawl it was, where every blow went home with an oath, and those who fell were trampled by those who fought.

Simon the philanthropist strove and struck

with the fury of a madman, so that no man could stand before him. After a time—whether long or short he never knew—he found himself standing ringed by a clear space. The fighting lust still burned in him; blood was flowing from more than one cut on his face; he was still shouting for an adversary, jeering at the throng for a pack of cowards. Some were advancing again, when a voice in his rear called out—

"Keep back, d—n you all, or he'll be the death of some o' you! Here's Farmer Fry with some ribs broken, and one or two others pretty bad. You'd best look after the wounded and mend your own heads, while I get this madman away."

The speaker then plucked at Simon's arm, saying persuasively—

"Come, sir, you've had fighting enough for one day. Damme, what'll the neighbourhood say of us, and me a poor devil with a practice to make?"

"Hands off!" cried Simon, angrily.

"Man, man, you'll ruin my reputation as a quiet young doctor. Come, don't be rough on a chap who has fought on your side and lost half his front teeth in the scrimmage! Suppose we stand easy a bit before we renew this pretty scene, anyway?"

Simon found himself being drawn quietly to the archway, still exhorted by the good-natured voice; and in two minutes Jack Syme—for he it was—had captured the first empty farmer's gig he could lay hands on, hustled his charge on to the seat, jumped up himself, and was driving rapidly across the open space beside the town hall in the direction of the Monks Damerel road.

It happened by a neat twist of circumstance that the cart belonged to Farmer Fry, who had begun the broil, and now lay insensible amid the wreck of the stall. As he drove over the town bridge and lashed the farmer's

mare into a hand gallop, Syme grinned at his own cleverness.

"But for this cart and my mother-wit, the row would have ended in manslaughter, I reckon," he chuckled. "As 'tis, there'll be a job or two for Dodson and the other doctors —and Terence 'll have to stand me a new set of teeth, by George! How d'ye feel, Mr. Secretan? I'm not a bit surprised at you; have seen something of your sort before now. No such fierce devil, when roused, as your big, fair-haired, soft-hearted cuss who wouldn't tread on a worm most times! But in your place I'd keep clear of the town for a month or two. You're the sort that gets drunk with fighting, and so it isn't good for you—or other people. There was a pal of mine at Bart's just of your stamp—a quiet chap enough in a general way, but a reckless firebrand at bottom. 'Struth, but you did maul some of 'em just now! 'Twas a pretty little row in its way, and I don't

pretend not to have enjoyed it. We're all savages at heart, you see—a blow or two, and the veneer of civilization comes off in cakes!"

Jack Syme smacked his thick lips by way of conclusion, and snapped together his remaining teeth with more relish than might have been expected from so very quiet a young doctor.

As they drove along and Simon's heat evaporated, he grew full of lassitude and weariness; yet, even so, listened to the doctor's rollicking talk, and responded to his consolatory efforts in a way which impressed Jack oddly. Syme began to be interested in this man whom he had hitherto hated with some cordiality.

"Secretan's an odd mixture," he reflected. "What the deuce can one make of a man who bears himself like an aristocrat, spends his days in scientific study or in fidgeting the poor, mixes philanthropy with libertinism,

listens to what you have to say like a woman, and fights like a d—d lunatic? Here's the queerest amalgam I ever came across—a Don Quixote or a Don Juan; hang me if I know which!"

Upon reaching the first lodge gates of Monks Damerel, Jack offered to put his passenger down, but Simon entreated him to drive on to the hall and have some lunch, adding, "You've got me out of a bad scrape, and I've hardly even thanked you yet."

"Psha! that's nothing; but anyway, I'll drive you home and look to your wounds and bruises a bit. There's a cut on your cheek that needs sewing up, for one thing. Suppose we drive into the stable-yard, however, for Sir Hamo ought not to see you in this blood-stained condition?"

Accordingly Syme touched up the mare, turned into the avenue, and again betook himself to reflection.

He was the only person in Chillington

whom Secretan had really injured; and this befriending of an enemy—a man whose uncalled for interference had done serious hurt to his prospects—gave Jack Syme one or two new sensations; stirring his magnanimity, yet calling for some self-contempt. Accustomed to carry through a quarrel to its bitter end, he was now showing a forgiveness worthy of the copy-books. "However, he's an aristocrat at bottom, and is sure to cut me dead in a day or two, when I shall be free to cuss him again at will." With this apology for his own good feeling, Jack satisfied his mind.

Half-way up the avenue they were stopped by a richly dressed and stately woman whom Syme suspected, yet could hardly believe, to be the housekeeper at the hall. But it was no other than Mrs. Henley; and she approached the near side of the trap as soon as it drew up with a stiff curtsey to Mr. Secretan, saying—

"I beg your pardon, sir, but Sir Hamo directed me to give you this note before you entered the house, if possible."

With the tact of a well-trained servant, Mrs. Henley seemed to disregard Simon's strange and battered appearance; but her quick glance at him as he took the note was full of spiteful triumph, and her half-smile was feline.

While his companion walked aside a few paces, the doctor fell to regarding this formidable woman. Her severe looks impressed him not a whit, but the superior fashion of her garments and her loftiness of mien, called forth a train of philosophical reflection.

"She's a deal better off than I shall ever be," he mused, "and will have nice pickings when the old gentleman slips his cable. I might do worse than make her an offer of marriage? Yes, and I'd do it to-morrow, by Jove, though she's old enough to be my

mother—only she'd never look at anything so low as a doctor. Fancy introducing such a duchess of a woman to our little villa at Hammersmith—lord, how she would sneer! Hullo! is she going to make advances to me?"

Mrs. Henley was, in point of fact, bent upon having some discourse with the doctor. She now came close to the cart, carefully holding back her silk dress from the muddy wheel, and whispered eagerly—

"Is it true, sir? about the other night, I mean? Mr. Doidge has been closeted with Sir Hamo for ever so long, and I overheard —at least they talked so loud, that a sentence or two reached me—about Mr. Simon and the cricket meeting."

"Ezekiel up there!" Syme gave vent to a low whistle. "Then he only means to spoil Secretan's prospects? I should hardly have thought the crazy fellow would have been satisfied with so mild a course?"

"Is it true, Doctor Syme? Were you there yourself?"

"Yes, I was there. What did Sir Hamo say to the news?"

"He's cruel bad, sir. I had to send off for Dr. Clancy an hour ago, and he's with Sir Hamo still."

"Here's a scene in high life for the local papers," thought Syme. "Between the public and the parent our young squire is likely to get it hot, it seems?"

"If 'tis true," muttered Mrs. Henley between her shut lips, allowing her intense excitement to gleam in her eyes for a moment, "Sir Hamo 'll cut him off with a shillin', sure as I stand here; ay, and will understand why Miss Nell had to throw him over. Ah! I always thought there was some bad story behind that."

"You always *hoped* it, judging by your looks," thought Syme. "However, perhaps you're not far wrong. Likely enough, Miss

Nell had suspicions, and Secretan the sinner made way for Clancy the comparative saint; in fact, vice was humbled, and virtue triumphant—as always happens in this best of worlds."

Instead of gratifying Mrs. Henley by expressing these sentiments aloud, however, Jack looked over his shoulder to see how the sinner was faring.

Simon was leaning against a tree with the letter crushed in his hand. He had turned very pale, and with his torn clothes and cut-open cheek, presented a rather ghastly appearance; but, finding himself observed curiously, he quickly straightened himself, and stalked to the trap haughtily enough.

"You can tell your master that he will hear from me shortly," he said to Mrs. Henley; and she bowed without daring to hazard a remark or ask a question, though half frantic with curiosity.

"I am sorry to say," Simon turned to the

doctor, with a courteous bend of the head, "that I cannot offer you any hospitality at the hall to-day; but I hope you'll come and lunch with me at the Falcon?"

"D—n it, the man has pluck!" muttered Syme. Aloud he said something confusedly about an engagement. He was conscious that this man with the pale face and quiet voice was mastering him as well as the housekeeper; there was a kind of proud despair about Simon that awed and touched him at once.

"I'm sorry you won't lunch with me; but in that case let us drive back into the village."

Jack Syme did everything he was told like a schoolboy under the master's orders; and when they drove off, Mrs. Henley stood gazing after them.

"Has he gone altogether?" she asked herself. "Have we ousted his philanthropic lordship for good and all? If so, the Lord be praised!"

The pair proceeded at once to Monks Damerel hamlet and pulled up before the first cottage, where Secretan descended.

Almost before his foot touched the ground, a wrinkled old woman came forth carrying a slate in her hand. This old body was known to Jack Syme as a deaf-mute, Sarah Venn by name, who looked after and cleaned Mr. Secretan's observatory.

Simon began at once to write upon her slate, reading the words aloud as though willing to make Syme aware of his plan—"I wish you to come over to Hollacomb Farm as soon as possible; I am going to live there for a month, and shall be glad to have your services as housekeeper."

Mrs. Venn, after perusing the slate, nodded and smiled, well content to serve the open-handed young squire, and too old, or too indifferent, to feel any curiosity about his sudden freak.

"And now, Mr. Syme, I mustn't trespass

upon your kindness any longer. You've been a friend in need to me to-day, and I only hope Farmer Fry won't proceed against you for stealing his trap."

"You're going to stay here?"

"I'm going to walk on to Hollacomb. You can leave me here."

"I'm hanged if I do," cried the other brusquely. "You ain't fit to do the walk. If you're bound for Hollacomb, so am I."

Secretan jumped up without more words, and they once more set off.

Jack Syme felt all abroad by this time, and drove along in puzzled silence. It was clear that a breach of some sort had occurred between Sir Hamo and his son, but that Simon should set up his tent at Hollacomb above all other places, the scene of his victim's death, filled him with astonishment. The farm was a lonely, deserted place, buried among lonely, dripping woodlands. Old Mr. Pethick had been removed by his friends

on the day of the inquest; already it was rumoured that the dead girl's spirit haunted the farm and path by the canal. What in the name of wonder could induce Secretan to bury himself in this gruesome spot with a deaf, speechless old crone for his sole companion?

Yet, for all his self-confidence, Jack Syme could not bring himself to ask any prying questions; for not only had Secretan's stoical bearing a suppressive power of its own, but his very courtesy magnified the same. Nor could the doctor, whose own experience inclined him to look upon poverty and physical suffering as the only serious ills of life, realize that this proud, healthy, well-to-do gentleman, could be suffering any pangs calling for the pity of a poor devil like himself.

They passed slowly through a long rutty lane, emerged on to the high-road for a mile or so, then commenced the steep ascent

through the Hollacomb woods, reaching the farm about two o'clock.

This ancient farmhouse of Simon's was built upon a small knoll, and so elevated somewhat above the canal banks. It had been in possession of his mother's family through many generations, having been in all probability designed as a residence for some younger son at a period when the junior members of a county family settled into some small house on the ancestral estate without much thought of carving out a career; or even, as in very many cases, set up as small tradesmen in the neighbouring market-town.

Most of the land attached to the homestead had generations ago been absorbed into a neighbouring large farm, and the remainder planted with oak and birch trees; thus the little group of buildings had been gradually immersed in an advancing tide of woodland.

When the spring-cart with its two passengers emerged on to the narrow breadth of sward that lay between knoll and canal, Syme gazed at the dreary place with a kind of shudder, then glanced quickly at his companion as though expecting him to change his mind.

But Secretan descended without hesitation, and made his way to a big stone under which he knew the house-key to be concealed.

Key in hand, he then mounted the knoll by a little curving path which led up to the glazed door of the farm parlour. This door opened on to some steps cut in the rock, and was sheltered by two immense ash-trees with rugged pinkish-grey bark and great moss-cushioned limbs. Under the trees was a rustic seat erected by Simon's late tenant, Mr. Pethick, who would sit here dabbling with his science primers through half a summer day. Here, too, had Mary sat and dreamed away the time over some romance

thick-sown with noble names, when no concert or other diversion drew her steps townwards.

"Come up and see the place," Secretan called out, when he had unlocked the door. "Some of the old man's furniture is quaint and curious."

"No, thank you," grinned Syme from below; adding, in a voice of some concern, "Surely you're not going to spend a whole month in this desolate hole?"

Secretan certainly looked out of keeping with his surroundings as he stood upon the rocky steps, with the sodden thatch dripping mournfully upon him, and on all sides ruined woodlands weeping for the dead and gone summer.

"May I ask if you intend remaining in the neighbourhood when your hermit-month is up?" asked the doctor when Simon emerged from a brief inspection of the homestead.

"At the end of a month I shall leave it with the fixed intention of never seeing it again."

"I begin to understand," the other muttered under his breath. "Secretan's not mad, but bent upon doing a penance. He's bitten with remorse, and means to work it off by solitary confinement. Yes, that's how the case stands; I've hit it at last. And how much will that benefit the poor girl who has gone to kingdom-come, I wonder? What cussed odd corners there are in the man, to be sure! Now, how am I to part from him? Shall I offer to shake hands? No; he'd think that infernal presumption. Besides, I've only half forgiven that old injury. Yet I'd shake hands like a shot if he cared to do it." Simon was now standing beside the trap, evidently expecting the other to depart. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Secretan."

"Good-bye, and many thanks."

"Don't mention it. Good-bye."

Syme gathered up his reins, paused, felt mean, and nearly dropped them again; then drove off without further demonstration, looking hot and uncomfortable.

CHAPTER IX.

THERE was a cheerful commotion at the White House one morning some ten days after Simon's secession to his woodland hermitage, for Nell Clancy, being now pronounced convalescent, was to descend to the morning-room and throw aside the distasteful *rôle* of interesting invalid.

She had been very apologetic for permitting herself to be laid up at all, and stated her intention of exhibiting her old robust health from this day forth.

"I do so hate being a nuisance to everybody and turning your home into a hospital, Terence," she had been exclaiming several

times a day; but her careful husband, well aware of her tendency to be over-energetic, had hitherto flatly declined to allow her downstairs.

Terence had made many little preparations for her comfort, bustling about upon one small errand after another with the ardour of a schoolboy and the thoughtfulness of a woman; but, being called away into the town just as she was about to descend, he missed the pleasure of welcoming her back to the routine of happy everyday life.

About midday, however, he cantered up the hill again, and rushed in exultingly to greet his young wife.

But the brightness fell from him before he had taken two steps into the room. He found Nell lying back in an armchair, looking tearful and woebegone.

Terence's first impulse was to turn back, jump on Rosalind's back, and gallop away

from the house. He guessed at once what had happened, and knew that the inevitable climax, which he had yet hoped to put off a few days longer, could not now be avoided.

Strict injunctions had been laid upon the servants not to breathe a word to their mistress of the events with which the place was ringing; but doubtless during his absence this morning some pertinacious friend had thrust herself upon Nell and babbled for an hour of the cricket meeting, the brawl in the market-place, the retirement of Simon to the farm, and all the rest of it.

"Do stay, Terence dear," entreated Nell, seeing that her husband was inclined to edge away towards the door, "and let me know the truth about this dreadful business. Ah, I can see by your face that there is something seriously wrong."

Terence sat down, pale and perturbed, at some little distance from his wife.

"Who has been to see you?" he asked,

in a voice that accorded well with his looks.

"Miss Doddridge, dear."

"I thought so. That woman is no better than a fool!"

"You're vexed with her for telling me all this wretched news; but I must have heard it sooner or later. Oh, Terence, is any of it true?"

"Is what true?"

"All this about Simon?"

"I can't answer vague questions like that. I do wish you would be a little more specific, Nell. Do you mean, was a public accusation made against him? Yes, that is true."

"No, no. What do I care about the mere fact of the accusation? I want to know upon what ground it was based, what vestige of excuse even his worst enemy could find for hinting such a thing about a man like Simon?"

"You always did have a mighty high opinion of that spotless hero!"

"Yes," Nell answered simply, "and that's how it is I find it absolutely impossible to believe him guilty of any bad conduct whatsoever. Surely you have been to him, Terence, and heard his indignant denials, and have promised to stand by him? I can understand how he might have kept silence when Ezekiel Doidge fell upon him in public in that shameless way; for Simon is at bottom a proud and stubborn man—and—and—yes, I can half understand it, though I can't explain it. But, surely you have seen him, dear?"

"I have seen him; but what passed between us was spoken in confidence."

"Then I will see him myself, and force the truth from him, and proclaim it abroad, and put a stop to these wicked slanderous lies!"

"This excitement is very bad for you, Nell. I wish you would exercise some self-

control, instead of throwing yourself into this hysterical state."

"So I am hysterical—if that's the word for being angry and bitterly disappointed. How can you be so calm and apathetic when poor old Simon, the friend who has loaded you with benefits, is writhing under this public disgrace?"

"Confound his benefits and his virtues too!" cried Terence, starting up with an ugly fold in his brow. "Isn't it enough to be loaded with obligation by a man I—I *hate*—without being dosed with his excellences by way of daily tonic?"

Nell, weakened by recent illness, wept quietly; but there was a growing stubbornness in her face which clearly meant no surrender. She had hitherto dealt tenderly with her husband's jealousy, abstaining whenever possible even from the mention of Simon's name; but she was for the moment stirred into downright antagonism by Ter-

ence's apparent inclination to range himself on the side of the accusers. Defend Simon she must, at all hazards. Her heart and mind were seething with indignant denial of his guilt.

Her husband, reading her face with a sidelong glance, fell into a silence which looked like mere sulkiness, but had a deeper significance than was apparent. He had proposed that this explanation, which sooner or later would have to be got through, should result only in vague generalities and hints that all would come right, rounded off in due course by sympathy and caresses. But, as usual, he had been over-sanguine, had relied too much upon the simple adoration, the sweet obedience of his dutiful little wife. Feeling himself little less than a demi-god in her eyes, he had counted upon her meek acceptance of such soothing half-explanations as he could afford to give.

He now perceived that Nell had formed

a resolution to know the why and wherefore of this matter, and that she possessed a fund of bitter obstinacy that must be reckoned with. Her angry championship of Simon brought back his old jealousy with a rush; and her failure in the adoring obedience he had looked for gave it added potency, at the same time filling him with alarm. This mood of hers was dangerous. He could not have her proclaiming Simon's innocence from the house-tops, thereby working up public opinion to a thorough investigation of, instead of quiet acquiescence in, his guilt. She was like one who stands whirling a firebrand over a hidden magazine of gunpowder, the sway of whose arm must be checked at all hazards. Her hands must be tied fast, and the only bonds available were—lies. The situation was too acute to permit of mere finessing on his part; its only possible cure lay in downright lying. Terence's brain buzzed with the hard think-

ing it was put to, but no compromise would shape itself to his efforts. His one chance seemed to rest upon her absolute acceptance of Simon's guilt; to achieve which he must if necessary add lie to lie, false evidence to false evidence.

Nor would a temporary edifice of falsehood suffice now; the building must needs be such as would last his lifetime. By saying little, by merely allowing her to drift with public opinion, he had hoped to leave himself a loophole for final confession; but once he had deliberately, of his own free will, laid his guilt upon Simon's shoulders, he felt that no possible combination of circumstances could ever give him strength to own to such baseness; the terror of Nell's scorn would keep him lying on so long as the power of speech remained to him.

And Terence had not yet sunk so low as to be able to face this prospect without self-loathing. His conscience had been

drilled into surprising obedience lately, but was not yet so wearied out as to be capable of sleeping through all noises. It was awake now, goading him insistently with Simon's past kindness and brotherly love, and most of all with his late self-sacrifice.

Her husband's face, always reflective to emotion, as pool to passing cloud, offered plain tokens of his present mental struggle, and touched Nell with swift contrition.

"I am sorry, oh, I am sorry!" she cried, drawing towards him. "It was harsh and untrue to call you apathetic. You feel it as much as I, dear; but I was always dreadfully hasty. All the same, Terence," she continued firmly, with warm blood rising in her cheeks, "you *must* bear to hear that Simon's honour is very dear to me, that I always shall look upon him as a brother whom I have wronged deeply; who can never be more than a brother, but who, once for all, can never be less. Now tell me all that this wretched

man Doidge said to him at the cricket meeting?"

Then, with a seared heart, a desolating sense of having sunk lower than he had ever conceived possible, Terence entered upon his task.

He began by rehearsing the different points of Ezekiel's indictment. When he came to the story of the letter, Nell bowed her head and wept bitterly. With dry lips, in mechanical tones, he told of the clamour that thereupon ensued, to loud calls upon Simon to answer, yea or nay, the earnest appeals of Lord Bridistow and other friends; finally, of Simon's haughty refusal to say a word in his defence.

Nell listened without raising her head, in stony silence. Her ideal Simon was turning to clay, and must soon fall to "cureless ruin."

"And I always thought him too good for me," she whispered presently, in a scared,

hopeless sort of way. "He always seemed to stand upon a height quite above and beyond me."

"That's why I hate him still," said Terence, breathing heavily.

A new outrush of jealousy was bearing Terence along now, making this traitor's task easy of performance. "This loving wife of yours," the demon whispered in his ear, "was false to him once, and would be to you upon sufficient provocation. Were she to find out the truth she'd spurn you, and martyrize this matchless and faithful old lover. Trample on him now he's down; trample, you fool, or he'll rise up some day and blow your happiness to fragments! It has been the same story all through, from the first moment of your caring for Nell —either he must go down or you. It is a death fight between you and Simon, and you can't skulk off the field. Either pin him to the ground now he's down, or throw down

your arms like a sentimental fool, and have done with it!"

"Do you remember that evening by the canal?"—he spoke now in a low malignant voice that sounded strangely to Nell—"and how Simon's conduct puzzled you? How he seemed to expect what he found?"

"Oh, don't, don't," moaned Nell; "it is dreadful to have it built up step by step—let me hold fast to what little hope I have."

"I remember your precise words that night. 'He seemed to be looking for this.' That was what you said upon the spur of the moment, that was the impression you drew from the circumstances without a word from any one to bias you."

He went on steadily building up his case, spurred hard by fear and jealousy, until Nell could no longer hold her own against the cumulative evidence that he piled up. But, if her reason was well-nigh convinced, her heart was still rebellious.

"You seem almost to take a pleasure in forcing me to condemn him, Terence?"

He winced uneasily. For the moment the ardour of his malice was abated; for to keep it at the necessary high pitch he needed the full vigour of her opposition, which was now growing feeble. He was becoming aware that this victory would be no bloodless one; that, as success grew more assured, the voice of his better self would once more insist upon a hearing, would scourge him the more fiercely when he had nothing left to fear. Already the sustainment of anger was giving way, the sickness of self-scorn was again creeping through him; the aftershine of old friendship was throwing into mournful relief the baseness of this old friend's betrayal.

Nell was weak and languid now, and much in need of her husband's consolation. One ideal was shattered; another seemed to be tottering. The man she respected most in the world had fallen lower than she could yet

realize: the one she loved most had spoken so harshly as to fill her heart with pain.

"Terence," she asked timidly, "has something come between us? Is it to be the old miserable story? Are we going to prove the justice of the world's miserable jeers about wedded love? You look so—so unlike yourself, and I'm so wretched, Terence. . . ."

Here she fell from quiet weeping into violent grief, so that Terence was fain to call himself a brute as well as a traitor. Yet he was incapable of soothing or caressing her. He sat with his own head bent, feeling in his degradation that he was unfit to touch her.

"Kiss me, Terence," she sobbed; "kiss me once and say that you still love me."

But he could make no response—and burning tears were falling from his own eyes.

"If I had but told the truth at the beginning," he groaned to himself, "they wouldn't have been so very hard on me. In time I might have held up my head again as a

doctor; and, after bearing my punishment, even *she* might have forgiven me.

"Nell," he said presently aloud, making a miserable effort to recover a fragment or two of self-respect, "you ought to keep yourself from being too hard on the man. Think how severely tried he must have been by your dismissal? In that state of raging disappointment a man is hardly responsible for his actions. When you turned upon me that night at Hollacomb Manor I was beside myself; . . . and—and I know what his state must have been a fortnight later, when he came upon you and me in the larch wood. Good heavens! is a man to be condemned so utterly for one false step—now, doubtless, repented of bitterly?"

"God forgive me if I'm hard," Nell answered solemnly; "but I hope never to see his face again."

It will be seen that Simon was paying the penalty with her, as with the bulk of his

judges, of his former spotless reputation. It is a commonplace truth—cynical on the surface, but perhaps honourable to human nature if probed deep enough—that the weight of a sinner's condemnation is always in direct proportion to the supposed excellence of his character. We can be lenient to our weaker brethren, but our heroes must be without stain. A Claudio may go astray without drying up human charity, but an Angelo who slips is past praying for.

"You hope never to see him again?" repeated Terence, bitterly. "I suppose that is a sample of the mercy an erring mortal may look for from a good woman who visits districts and never slurs a duty? Nell, you're too good for a poor devil like me, who never hopes to be quite perfect!"

"Such pleading will not soften Simon's guilt much," she answered sadly.

"But a moment ago you were crying out upon me for being hard on him, and now

you cut me up for saying a single word in his favour? Lord preserve us from feminine consistency as well as feminine mercy!"

"Forgive me, Terence; I know I'm inconsistent—but I'm very miserable too. You don't know what a blow this has been to me; . . . and I can't bear to hear you speak to me so bitterly." Then, with eyes full of tender submission and love, she whispered, laying a small hand on his neck, "You forgive me, dear? Oh, Terence, don't be hard with me! And let us quarrel no more now—and never, never again. Kiss me, beloved; your love is more dear to me than life!"

She stooped her head until her long lashes brushed his forehead; but Terence could only mutter in a choking voice—

"'Tis you that are hard. I cannot kiss you: you crush a sinner like me with your virtue. I'm not good enough for you, and can never hope to be!"

CHAPTER X.

THE moist warm mist of the Chilling vale had given way at the dry calm touch of genuine winter.

There was a thin coating of snow over the houses and streets of the town; the open fields wore a lace mantle of pure white, freckled with earthy brown, and mottled here and there with the richer hue of soil cast up by the moles. Ezekiel Doidge's group of farm buildings, which lay in the meadows below Hollacomb Great Wood, formed a ruddy oasis in the broad spread of whiteness. The woodlands, of a heavy purplish black, made another strong contrast; the osier

beds by the canal showed golden-brown and pale amber, and the still water gave back the fleece of mixed greys which formed the quiet sky above it. The smoke of the farmstead went up straight and evenly. Save the two men cutting and binding faggots at the edge of a plantation, not a soul was to be seen in all the breadth of meadow and copse. Rooks were cawing and circling in a quiet melancholy way above the hanging woods, while the croak of cock pheasants rose up to greet them. The distant moor was clear, but not shapely defined. There was a slight frost in the air, and everywhere a sense of pause and rest.

Along the canal path, a mile or more within the woodland, the hermit of Hollacomb was slowly strolling.

Simon's intention of cutting himself off from the human portion of the world had been carried out with some completeness; but his endeavours to create a world of his

own out of books and work, to be independent of human kindness, fellowship, and the other ingredients of happiness presumably supplied to man by his neighbours, had not been so successful.

In that dismal retreat of his Simon had proposed to substitute brain-stuff for heart-stuff, to take to heart mathematical problems in place of human ones. There seemed no need for insane hatred of his fellows, such as befell Athenian Timon: he proposed rather to ignore their existence altogether. He had spent some years of his life in the endeavour to benefit the community of Chillington, and the place had opened its mouth to swallow down his disgrace with a greedy readiness. He had occupied a twelvemonth in trying to win the love of his promised bride, and had succeeded in completely estranging her. He had lent a strong helping hand to a friend, whose gratitude had taken the form of simple robbery. Half

a lifetime of patient affection had rendered him no more than tolerable in his father's eyes, and had issued at length in a breach which would probably never be healed. In each of these cases he seemed to have vitiated all chance of success simply by trying too hard; so the only rational procedure for the future seemed to be to try not at all.

Simon had come to this conclusion, he considered, by process of calm reason; a sequence of pure syllogisms had led up to his hermitage. He conceived himself to be a fully equipped philosopher, minded to follow Teufelsdröck's method of handling the fraction of life; to make no demand of it whatever; to reduce the denomination of the fraction to zero, and so achieve an infinity of calm satisfaction. But, it need hardly be added, this recluse of Hollacomb was nothing but an unlucky man, with crushed hopes and a sick heart, who had

stuck fast in the centre of indifference. He was, to borrow the words of a real philosopher, "one of such as take too high a strain at first, and are magnanimous more than the tract of years can uphold."

He had not, as many people imagined, been turned out of house and home by his father, for Sir Hamo had a superstitious objection to any such harsh, Roman-fatherly proceeding. Though he had never found much difficulty in bruising his son's heart, he could not bring himself to the point of turning his person out of doors. The note delivered by Mrs. Henley in the avenue had intimated Sir Hamo's acceptance of his son's guilt, as proved by his silence under public accusation, and had requested that Simon should in future confine himself to the west wing of the hall, and spare his father the pain of further communication with him. To this Simon had rejoined by a brief business-like epistle—written as it were with

chilled steel, though the penman's heart was burning—to state that he would never again present himself at the hall save at his father's own request.

This final alienation was among the first-fruits of Simon's Quixotic compact with Terence Clancy, and a plentiful crop was yet to follow. He had not yet realized the impossibility of fencing in the effects of a given line of conduct; and had yet to learn that a man cannot lift a finger without affecting the whole complex network of relations by which he is bound to others, that the current of will which starts a given action cannot be conducted in a given direction by a patent insulated wire.

But these facts of ordinary experience were beginning to impress themselves upon him during this afternoon's saunter, thereby adding another degree or two to his normal mental gloom.

Water-voles and small birds, growing

daily tamer now that winter had really set in, were the only companions of his walk; and the placid hush of nature seemed only to aggravate the morbid nervous condition in which three weeks of solitary brooding had landed him. Existence hung upon Simon like a heavy saturated garment, and no amount of philosophizing helped in any way to reduce its weight. In short, he was utterly weary of himself this afternoon, of his own hopeless disappointments and cynical heart-burnings; yet dreaded returning to his solitary room, and the labour that had lost its power to physic pain.

As the time drew on, however, he began to feel that any change must be for the better, that even the four walls of a room would have a less stifling effect upon his spirits than the solemn woods and cold gliding water.

Accordingly he turned his steps homewards, and began to walk more briskly.

Upon reaching the patch of sward, now snow covered, below the farm, Simon caught the glint of his own fire through the glazed door of the parlour. But this failed to cheer him, causing rather a mental reaction in favour of the snowy landscape outside; for he had done too much solitary thought-grinding by that log fire to find much welcome in its gleam.

He toiled slowly up the knoll and opened the glazed door.

The little room might have looked snug enough with a buxom farmer's wife sewing by the fire, and a group of children scrambling; but the firelight displayed only the old book-case in which still stood Mr. Pethick's row of science primers, and the table strewn with Simon's now hateful work. He entered in a spiritless way, pausing on the threshold as though but half inclined to face it.

But, upon drawing near the fire, Simon's

glance fell upon a figure seated in a shadow near the door which led through into the kitchen; whereupon he started in a way significant of his nervous condition.

A sudden shoot of flame from the wide grateless hearth showed the figure to be that of Kate Tredethlyn. She rose and stood before him, gravely silent.

Nor was Simon at first capable of uttering a word. The appearance of this visitor vexed and surprised him, for he had given strict orders to his housekeeper to admit no one, gentle or simple.

After regarding him for a few moments somewhat nervously, though with a gleam of sympathetic amusement in her eyes, Kate ventured to break the silence.

"I have come to see you, Simon," she said in a voice which came with difficulty, "and in the first place I must exonerate your housekeeper from the charge of harbouring me. She wrote your wishes down

on a slate, and then only stopped short of pushing me out at your door."

Simon placed a chair for his visitor mechanically and leant against the table, grasping it with one hand, and staring at her confusedly. Kate's presence contrasted as abruptly with the narrow mental routine into which he had fallen as her graceful figure, richly be-furred and mantled, with the homely little chamber.

For the first few moments she preserved a tense, alert attitude, as of one who anticipates a combat, and means fighting; but by this bold venture into his citadel she had captured Simon's works at a stroke. It was evident that he was in a dazed condition, and without a thought of driving her out again.

She relaxed her vigilance accordingly, loosed the fur boa round her neck, stretched her snowy boots towards the glowing logs, and said in a natural, commonplace way—

"I'm tired with the walk, Simon. Could you let me have a cup of tea?"

The simple question made a curious anti-climax to Simon's expectations. He had looked for an outburst of some sort, for some speech or appeal pitched in a dramatic key, and this homely request brought his feet to the ground with a beneficial jar. Then Kate smiled at him, and the ice was broken for the present.

He walked through to the kitchen, and Mrs. Venn, who had, perhaps, been enough with young ladies to foresee this inevitable request of Kate's, returned with him almost immediately, bearing a tray with a black tea-pot, some massive slices of bread-and-butter, and thick whity-brown teacups, such as matched the homely character of the little parlour.

Kate at once turned round to the table and began to pour out the tea with a matter-of-course air, which rather astonished her

host, now that his faculties were completely awakened.

"You like two lumps, Simon, I know. Have you got any marmalade in this Castle Dismal of yours?"

Mrs. Venn, watching the lady's lips, needed no interpretation by slate, and quickly fetched and opened a pot of marmalade, placed on a big plate patterned with staring blue. She was pleased, in a mild, unemotional sort of fashion, at seeing her master entertain a guest, but her feelings had, for a quarter of a century, ceased to be of a vivid order. Simon had chosen her as a person as nearly approaching to the wooden as flesh and blood could be found. The poor old woman had, indeed, reached the stage when a settled wage and a decent fire made the sum of her demands; a lower denominator to the fraction of life even Simon could not hope to compass.

Kate observed the philosopher furtively as

she drank her tea. The gloom had settled down upon him again, and he looked stubborn as well as sad.

"We haven't shaken hands yet, Simon," she remarked, when the silence seemed to have grown dense as a fog.

"No, I believe not."

This was an unpromising beginning, but Kate knew the man she had to deal with, and was resolved not to stir from the fireside until she had forced a little conversation from the hermit. She planted herself more firmly in her chair, and essayed him again.

"I don't see what is to prevent our going through the ceremony, Simon, do you?"

Simon only stared at the fire more stubbornly than before.

"I don't see why I should be treated as an enemy, for"—she paused a moment that her voice might be quite firm—"for I believe nothing of what they have said against you. I believe the accusation to be either a miser-

able blunder, or part of some plotter's scheme to save himself."

He smiled faintly.

"You always were a rebel against public opinion, Kate."

"Well, put it down to sheer obstinacy, if you will, but let me have the credit of it—and shake hands."

"Very well—if it gives you any pleasure."

"It does," she said, giving him her hand; "it is a pleasure to shake hands with one whose transcendent obstinacy is like an ocean beside my poor puddle of self-will. Oh, Simon, Simon," she continued, suddenly throwing aside her mocking tone, "it makes me wretched to see you here! How long do you intend to keep up this miserable farce? Are you going to spoil your whole life by way of gratifying your insane pride?"

Then Simon, moved by her friendly warmth, began to let his numbed heart speak.

"It doesn't matter much what course I

take, Kate, for, once awakened to the realities of life, one knows that nothing's worth troubling about."

"A sudden rush from one pole to the other is not an awakening," cried Kate. "But you always were in extremes, Simon; for all your brains, you never had mental balance, somehow. To you every man is a hero or a scoundrel, and the world a seventh heaven or a Gehenna, according to your mood. But go on—tell me more about yourself."

"My life's nothing but a weariness," he cried, with a sudden pouring forth of pent emotion, which carried Kate along like a tide. "I've wasted my life grubbing like a fool among weeds, and taking them for flowers. I tell you there are no such things as human love and brotherhood; they are nothing but abstractions, creations of the mind, wherewith human nature has been invested by man's fancy, as inanimate nature

with joy, or sadness, or peace. Self-love and self-interest one may look for, and find with certainty; and I believe a journey through a million inhabited planets would yield nothing better to the searcher. Listen now, Kate. Do you know that the element carbon, the chief constituent of vegetable life, the element invariably present in animal life, and of transcendent importance throughout our planet, is proved to be also a constituent of the comets?—in other words, to be present throughout the length, breadth, and height of the material universe? Well, I believe self-interest to have as universal a spread. You would find man, or whatever created thing corresponds to man, the same mean creature upon all the billions of planets plunged in the depths of space. You'd find self-interest the leading motive, the only real motive, that drives life along in the sun-systems placed as far beyond Sirius as Sirius is from our own. Self-love is a tolling bell,

whose tones ring through the universe—the knell of human happiness throughout time and space."

"I don't believe it." Kate stood up and gesticulated, driven out of all dignity by Simon's excitement. "I don't believe it. If other planets are inhabited, I believe they are full of beauty and happiness; that our weariness and pain and littleness are unknown to them; that all our better imaginings may there be glorious realities; that there man is not separated from his Maker, and the still better state that awaits him, by the miserable web that shuts us in; that our planet is the only one where man is condemned to look through a dark glass for threescore years and ten!"

"Tush, tush!" cried Simon, hotly; "there's nothing on the other side of the glass but the freezing ether of space!"

"Well, I don't exactly know what space is, or haven't a notion what ether means,"

said Kate, with a sigh; "so it is useless to attempt arguing with a learned person like you. In fact, I'm a wretched bungler altogether, Simon, and this visit of mine seems likely to be a failure. I came here to try and cheer you, and how can I manage that when you do nothing but entangle me among planets and sun-systems, and things that I know nothing about?"

"I say again that, just as carbon——"

"I don't want to hear any more about carbon, and don't believe you understand anything about it. To begin with, you said it was an important element in animal as well as vegetable life. Now, whoever heard such nonsense as that? Do you mean to assert that I'm made of the same stuff as a cabbage?"

"You re a very human-hearted sort of vegetable, Kate, anyway," he laughed; "and don't distress yourself with the notion that your visit has been a failure; for, in truth,

you've done me a deal of good, and I've been a churl not to let you see it. You're the only soul who has been near me, except old Squire Rush, who was driven off ignominiously by my she-dragon. Come, let us talk about something more cheerful. Tell me about yourself; I want to realize that my own *ego* does not comprise the whole universe. Has Julius Rush been down on short leave lately?"

In her softened mood, Kate was not averse to dwelling a little upon her own troubles; and the twilight having now fallen outside, the dim firelight invited confidence.

"No, I have not seen Captain Rush since —since that dinner-party at Hollacomb. He was very distant and unfriendly then, Simon. I doubt if he will ever say a cordial word to me again."

"Your treatment of his father has cut him up, Kate. You couldn't have chosen a more certain way of killing friendship than that."

Kate looked unusually meek, as though conscious of guilt, and rather anxious to be lectured than not. She drew her chair a little nearer to Simon, and sighed gently. If he would but talk a little of Julius Rush, and give her some hope that this flouted admirer of hers was not alienated for ever, Kate felt that she would go away a good deal cheered.

But Simon, not in the least comprehending a woman's mood, had nothing more to say.

She sighed again, and he regretted his blunder in having mentioned Rush's name.

"Well, I dare say you didn't mean to hurt his feelings," he said kindly, "and I won't bully you for not liking a man just because he is my friend. As I said before, let us talk of something cheerful."

Poor Kate, having ventured as far as maiden pride would let her, had to give up hope for the present; but she wished Simon had studied the human countenance a little more, and the face of the heavens a little

less. She rose to go, and, turning from the fire, glanced towards the glazed door at the other end of the room. In doing so she started violently, uttering a suppressed cry of alarm.

"Why, Kate, what has come to you?"

"There was a man's head close to the glass; he was staring in at us. Keep back, Simon—keep in the shade of the bookcase."

She pressed him back with both hands, breathing short and trembling nervously. By the time Simon had got free and hurried to the door, the man, whoever he might be, had vanished in the evening gloom.

"I'm glad of it—I'm glad of it!" she cried, rather hysterically for her; "he might have attacked you."

Simon laughed cheerfully, and began to search for her fur boa.

"Some one passing down the canal path saw the firelight and had a fit of curiosity—that's all about it, Kate."

"Do you think so?" she asked doubtfully. "I do wish you would quit this lonely place. I know you have enemies, and——"

"Rubbish! my dear Kate. Come, let us start, for I'm going to see you most of the way home."

CHAPTER XI.

THE face of which Kate had caught a glimpse through the glazed door belonged to no casual passer-by, but to a man who had been prowling about the farm and neighbouring woods night after night ever since Secretan's arrival—one who was, in truth, far more an object of pity than the lonely philosopher whose steps he was dogging.

Simon, the pursued, would probably regain his mental balance and resume the routine of a rational person, sooner or later; but Ezekiel Doidge, the pursuer, was in far more hopeless case. The man's previous history,

his bodily temperament, and the dead-weight of circumstances, were all combined in the work of hardening and stamping in the craze which now possessed him. He had domineered so long over those about him, had established such a reputation of superiority to the weaknesses of his neighbours, that, now trouble was come, human sympathy stood aloof from him; no one dared to do him the kindness of forcing his confidence.

And the only person into whose ear he felt minded to pour the "perilous stuff" that filled his heart was his sympathetic doctor, Terence Clancy, who, instead of giving him an opening for that salutary process, always contrived to hand over this patient to his assistant.

Growing bodily weakness, too, was lessening his power of resistance to the surges of morbid thought. He would do no work worthy of the name; he was too restless and irritable even to superintend the work

of others; and so poor Ezekiel's heart grew blacker as his vital force waned.

The tragic death of his sweetheart had gone far to craze the man; days and nights of miserable brooding had since then so stirred the gloomy depths of his nature that wholesome thinking was becoming impossible. His mind was always working round a weary circle of which Mary's shameful end was the centre. He conceived that his own harassing jealousy had first pressed her into the crooked path, that his want of vigilance had made her continuance in it possible; and now it seemed that his plain duty, the only purpose for which he ought to live, was to revenge her death. There was none else, her father being old and infirm, to see to the punishment of the man who had ruined her.

At first Ezekiel had been satisfied with the disgrace into which his efforts had plunged Simon; but very soon the gnawing

began afresh. The retirement to the farm was a mere passing whim, he considered; the result, no doubt, of a quarrel with his father. But that would be made up in due course, and then Secretan would come forth to resume his old position, the passing disgrace being slipped off like a worn-out garment.

But poor shattered Ezekiel was not cut out of the stuff Nature uses for the making of assassins, so that he could in no wise bring his mind—except in theory—to the cutting-off of his enemy in cold blood.

The very facilities offered by Secretan's lonely ramblings in the woods helped to make such a task an impossibility. He seemed to have none of the characteristic fears of a guilty conscience; nay more, his apparent blindness to his own danger induced in Doidge a hesitation amounting almost to doubt of his guilt.

There was no difficulty whatever in

dogging Secretan about the woodland paths at dusk; and more than once Doidge had looked in upon him lighted by lamp or firelight, as he had done this evening. Yet his gun had remained unloaded; the would-be avenger had never once so much as taken a cartridge from his pocket. He would scorn himself, and curse his own cowardice when he got home of a night, worn out with excitement and fatigue; and then would start off on the morrow, to follow, and track, and slink about, knowing full well that he would once more return with nothing done.

Thus, at the end of three weeks, Doidge was more than half beside himself with the recurring nightly strain; but had settled in his mind that only in one of two cases could he bring himself to draw trigger upon his enemy. Either he must come upon Secretan at the very spot where Mary's body was found, and find plain proofs of

his guilt in the man's face; or he must take the train to Lymport and force the truth out of Joyce Melladew, probably the only living person in whom Mary had confided. Until every vestige of doubt should be cleared away, brain and hand would continue to refuse their appointed task.

The glimpse he caught of Miss Tredethlyn donning furs and wraps, and of Simon preparing to bear her company, sent him reeling away, half dazed, into the darkness. For fear fathers a thought quite as often as a wish does, and Doidge's fear now begot the notion that this visit of Kate's was made to a repentant sinner, that she would never have continued such friendly relations with a hardened man who had confessed nothing. He conceived that she had come to soothe Secretan's remorse, that as they walked away together there would be some spoken admission of his unhappy condition; and then—then there would remain only for

Doidge the fulfilment of what he considered a sacred duty.

For, weak and sore smitten as the man was, he would not then shirk the course which nights and days of hard thinking had laid down as the right one. He slunk after the pair down the dark lane between the leafless hedges, and out into the high-road.

Once or twice he got near enough to hear their words. Simon was talking astronomy, telling Kate of the wonders of the Saturnian system; he spoke of nothing but the stars in their courses, while his companion listened, only throwing in a word now and then.

The revulsion of feeling caused by this innocent talk came as a shock to Ezekiel. He was glad to halt and rest upon a heap of stones, and allow some of his despair to float away on the night wind. He could ask no greater relief than the discovery of Secretan's innocence, and such a consum-

mation seemed now to be growing more probable. True, were it proved that he had hitherto been hunting a false trail, his next duty would be to start upon a fresh one; but there would be an interim of rest, and —this had come to be his true hope now— he might never discover the right man at all. The pursuit of his monomania had so broken Doidge that he longed only to have his task remitted altogether.

His principal desire now being to gain fresh confirmation of his hope, he decided to station himself at the head of the lane leading up to the farm, and there await Secretan's return. What course to pursue when Simon reappeared he could not yet decide, but he was full of a vague desire to have another good look at Simon's face when he thought himself unobserved, and of a vague hope of deriving some fresh consolation from being near him.

Accordingly the watcher retraced his steps

almost cheerfully, and ensconced himself among some fern and bramble at the head of the short lane.

The long lean stalks of brake-fern were broken off short here and there, like stubble, but otherwhere were hung with tressy masses of frond damply drooping, which, with brambles still showing a sprinkling of dun purple leaves, afforded adequate cover.

Doidge waited long, but the suspense was too mild to be wearisome. The drift of his thoughts became more cheerful as the time went by, for it took but a little thing to sway his mind now. He had deduced an added probability of Simon's guilt from the mere fact of Kate's presence at the farm, and now inferred his innocence from the mere ability to talk cheerfully upon his favourite topic. Logic had ceased to have weight with poor Doidge; he was no better than a straw blown hither and thither by successive gusts of nervous excitement.

By the time the moon had risen several degrees, and the thin web of clouds had grown thinner, he heard the creak and rumble of a farm-cart in the road below. It seemed to stop for a few seconds at the lower end of the lane; then, very soon, he heard footsteps.

His heart began to flutter again; the cold, which he had noticed but little hitherto, was now penetrating to the marrow of his bones. He peered through crannied thicknesses of bramble, and there was now light enough reflected from the white smoothness of the lane to define clearly the approaching figures. For Secretan was not alone. He carried a child upon his shoulder, and was stooping to catch the words of a woman who walked beside him. They moved at a snail's pace.

In one quick agitated glance the watcher recognized Joyce Melladew. The sight of her gave him a fresh stab of fear. Joyce

must know the absolute truth as to Mary, and upon what other business could she possibly have come to see Simon? Doidge was already sliding back into despair. He thought that any moment now might be Secretan's last.

With shivering hand he put two cartridges into his gun—"One for him, and one for me," he muttered in a crazed whisper.

Upon reaching the gate which shut off the lane from the grassy slope of the knoll, Simon seated the child upon the top bar, and Joyce took possession of her. Then he stepped back a pace or two, standing with his broad chest not four yards from Doidge's gun-muzzle.

"Still asleep?" he exclaimed; "why, nothing will wake the little creature now, Joyce. Last time I saw you she wouldn't go to sleep for love or money."

"She's very tired, sir. My little Rosebud has done a great deal to-day. I'm afeard

you'll have to let us sleep on your sofa to-night, Mr. Simon, for I'm a trifle tired myself—and there's something I *must* say to you before I leave."

"Why, of course, we shall manage to put you up, Joyce."

"You'll be at the farm for a few days longer, anyway?"

"Yes, for another week; after that my plans are quite unsettled."

Joyce panted a little and leaned against the gate, supporting the child's weight on it.

"Your being here at all is a mystery to me at present, Mr. Simon; for of all the mad freaks that have ever come into your mind, this bearing of another man's sins is the most astounding. Why don't you tell the truth and blow this traitor to atoms? I will myself to-morrow, if you persist in this madness. I'll go into Chillington High Street and proclaim him. . . ."

Not a syllable more did Doidge hear, for

at this point he fell back, fainting, among the dead leaves, and before he recovered they had passed on. Nor did he wish to hear more now; the truth was ready to his hand, his fingers could close over it at any moment —for this one night he could afford to allow himself rest and peace.

CHAPTER XII.

IN comparing himself with the gentler half of creation, man will sometimes set forth—in a condescending judicial way, with due sense of his own magnanimity—the one or two minor points of woman's admitted superiority. After stripping her of justice, honesty, generosity, and other garments which he has appropriated for himself, he kindly leaves her with such flimsy underclothing as may be woven of sympathy, unselfishness, and a few other trifling woman's graces. But he seldom realizes how supreme a barrenness must needs ensue upon the loss of these mere femininities.

"How are you, old fellow?" he asks by way of morning greeting; and before your first reply-syllable is formed, proceeds to a minute exposition of his own troubles, bodily and financial. For, judging you by himself, he shrewdly conceives that he must be first in the field in order to get a hearing at all.

It seldom strikes him that, if woman were to borrow his habit of selfishness, the wear of life would be well-nigh insupportable to all but the healthy and prosperous. For, though you may find scores who will accept harsh treatment from the world in general with tolerable fortitude, there are few indeed who can bear up against a friend's indifference to their troubles. The easy acquiescence in your misfortunes of those from whom you look for something better has a unique sting of its own; and the most resolute contemner of women will admit that it comes most often from members of his own sex.

Mrs. French-Chichester used to say in

cynical moments, "Blessed is he that expecteth little from male-friends—most blessed is he that expecteth nothing. Men don't 'sit and hear each other groan,' as the poet says; the voice of their own groaning prevents that." And perhaps such an indictment is not without a grain or two of justification.

To consider, for instance, Secretan and his present companion.

He is himself a philanthropist, a man who has given years of study to the question of how to better his fellow's condition, but he does not now perceive that the woman at his side is sick unto death, and can hardly support herself upright. He accepts with calmness her stoical explanation that she is "a bit tired." In such cases the kindest of men are blind as a gate-post.

Joyce, on the other hand, is, and always has been, a wilful woman. Through wilfulness she lost her home at the hall, through

wilfulness married Sergeant Melladew against the advice of all her friends; by wilfulness, in all probability, helped a middling bad man on the road to perdition. Yet she thinks more of Simon at this moment than of herself; hates to give him trouble; staggers along in pain and weariness rather than worry him with a single sigh or complaint.

Arrived at the steps, however, about half-way up the knoll, she was compelled to sit down and rest.

Simon carried the sleeping child in, laid her down before the fire, and returned, whistling softly.

"I wouldn't sit here long, Joyce; there's danger of your catching cold."

She smiled a wan smile, but said nothing.

"Come on, I'll help you up the steps if you're tired."

"I'm afraid—I shan't be able to move just yet."

Then the weakness of her voice struck

him. He lifted her in his arms, bore her through the glazed door, and laid her upon a straight horsehair thing understood by Mr. Pethick, its late owner, to be a sofa.

Then, being freed from the necessity of further effort for the present, Joyce grew a little fretful.

"Mr. Simon?" she said querulously.

"What is it, Joyce? Anything I can do for you? Are you hungry after your journey?"

"Yes, I am hungry. I want my Rosebud."

"Eh? She's all right down there by the fire. I want you to rest, not to fidget with the baby."

"I can't rest; give me my little one—I *will have her.*"

Simon laughed, for Joyce's peremptory tone carried him back to old nursery days, when he, a giant boy of eight years old, had been ordered about by a little creature hardly up to his waist-belt.

"Give me my baby-girl," she repeated, with a weak tear or two on her cheek; whereupon he hastily fetched the sleeping child, laid her beside her mother, and wheeled the sofa round before the blazing logs.

Joyce clasped the little creature with a long sigh of pleasure, carefully removed the outer wraps, spread the little limbs over herself, and laid the child-head upon the mother-heart.

The philosopher watched the pair curiously. He had come to this hermitage in order to be quit of the human race; but was now perhaps learning more of the human heart than the practice of much philanthropy could have taught him.

"You look ill, Joyce, now I come to observe you closely?"

"Oh, I'm well again now. You must excuse my weakness; but she and I are to part so soon."

"Will your work oblige you to leave her? I should have thought the doctor would have prohibited any close application?"

Joyce smiled again, with something like the old gleam in her eye.

"He says I shall soon be out of his hands, Mr. Simon."

"Come, that's good hearing. You'll soon be all right again; and if you need rest while recovering I must see what can be done about your little girl."

"Would you—would you really?" said the mother, half raising herself; "would you—— But I'm afraid to say it yet; no, no, I'll hang on to my hope a little longer. There's a kind of warmth spreading over me now, and I won't put the fire out just directly."

"I don't quite understand you, Joyce; but I think you should rest. Suppose I summon Mrs. Venn, and let her make you some broth or something, and then you might sleep?"

"No, thank you; I don't want her here.

Mr. Simon, if you were going to have an operation, which might cure, but would far more likely kill, would you put it off, or make the plunge and get it over?"

There was a yearning in the woman's voice which touched Simon, though he could make no guess at its meaning.

"My dear Joyce, you mystify me. What can I do for you?"

"You can make my few remaining weeks a paradise, and let me die in peace, blessing you," she answered in a strained heart-whisper.

"Tell me how."

"No—no; let me dream a little longer. I've given over the habit so long that 'tis like a childish treat come back. I won't tell you—I won't. If I do tell you, will you promise not to say 'No' to-night, so that my hope may dwindle gradually, instead o' bein' killed by a single word?"

"I will do anything in my power to give

you a little ease, Joyce. Your suffering hurts me. What can I do for you?"

She clasped her child closer, and turned two burning eyes upon him.

"Sir, do you mind how you used to beat your elder brother, Hamo, in the nursery when you quarrelled, and how Sir Hamo would beat you afterwards?"

"Yes, poor old Hamo! I was always master—but we used to make it up afterwards."

"And how I used to rage and storm at Sir Hamo for touching of you? I always took your part, and we were always good comrades, weren't we? Well, I want you to take my part against Fate now. Listen, Mr. Simon, and bear in mind your promise to give me to-night free—or I can say nothing. The doctor says I'm quite shattered; he gives me five or six weeks more o' life, at the outside. This journey to-day will probably knock off three—say I have about two

weeks left. Two days would suffice—two hours, if I could but get you on my side!"

Joyce paused for breath. Her intense earnestness oppressed her listener like a physical pain.

"But I don't wish," she resumed with anxious haste, "to stir up your feelin's about *myself*. I've been afeard of death just like other people; but fear gets stale and worn out in time, and mine's pretty well thread-bare by now. I could die without making much fuss; but for—— Oh, you can guess! Surely even a man can guess!"

"You dread parting from your little one, Joyce?"

"Ah, 'tisn't the parting merely; there's something a thousand times worse than that! 'Tis the leavin' her alone—motherless, friendless, alone—in a world that I've found bad enough! My blossom! my blossom!"

"In whose charge do you intend to leave her, Joyce?"

"I don't know; I don't know," she repeated, patting the child with her quivering hands. "My husband's relations are offended with me; they will have none of my child. I have no relations left of my own but that leathern-hearted housekeeper of yours at the hall. She has offered to take my Rose. Mrs. Henley will not let her hunger—except for love—will see that she's well fed and clothed—and miserable. The little one will be brought up to hate my memory. When she grows big her mother will be held up to her as a warning, and happiness will be kept from her like a poison!"

"I begin to understand——"

"Don't understand yet, sir. I'm not half prepared. I will talk to you for an hour before I let you understand." There was silence for a few minutes. Her next whisper seemed to pierce the silence like sharp steel. "Oh, *do* you understand already? Have

I spoilt my chance through over-haste? Mr. Simon, I entreat you not to let *her* suffer for my clumsiness."

"Joyce," he said in a troubled voice, "who am I to undertake the guardianship of a little child? A man disgraced and embittered, and——"

"A man," she cried with fierce haste, as though trying to clutch him with eyes and voice, "whom I would choose out of all the world, one who has justice and duty written on his heart. A woman might neglect her, unless she really loved my Rose; but you, even though you hated her, would but do your duty by her the more strictly. I don't ask you to raise her. Bring her up to the humblest station, so that you be but responsible for her. I know she must be something of a burden to you; but I'm a selfish woman in sore need. And, sir, you're one marked out to bear other people's burdens. You would have her on your mind; would

see that she had love and care as well as daily bread. And, sir, she's such a lovin' little thing! But now I'm gettin' weak, and can't say out a thousandth part of what was in my mind. Would you turn me over a little, so as I mayn't see you, Mr. Simon? It will be such a torture to watch your face, for I know you can't decide in a moment."

"I will go out into the air for a short time, Joyce, and consider whether I should really be doing you a service by undertaking this trust."

Simon opened the glazed door hastily and was gone. There was no sound in the room but that of the child's regular breathing, and a faint occasional crackle from the hearth.

When Simon re-entered, the sick woman could hardly draw breath. She lay, shaking, with closed eyes and set teeth.

He had taken but a step into the room when his voice came to her like a voice from

heaven, and his words fell warm upon her frozen heart.

"Joyce, I will take your little one."

She clasped his hand when he drew near, and kissed it, and placed it on her baby's head.

"May the God whom I've been so bitter against these many years bless you!" she whispered. "And mayhap even a rebel's blessing may go for something, sir, when it comes from a bursting heart!"

In this manner it came about that Joyce passed from suspense into mental ease and happiness.

It has been said that the mere cessation of severe bodily pain constitutes great happiness; but perhaps a deeper beatitude attends upon the relief from gnawing suspense of mind. In such a case it is impossible to do full justice to the welling blessedness of the moment. One is tempted to look back and be a little wretched again, so as to revel the deeper in heart-easing relief.

Simon seemed not merely to have given the sick woman a fresh lease of life, but to have shed upon her an aftershine of her merry, mischievous youth. She was anxious now for the child to awake in order to show her off to the new guardian; and even in this minor matter her wish was quickly gratified.

The child began to move and stretch, to fumble vaguely with her hands, to stuff both fists into her eyes, and finally to sit up, wide awake.

Simon began for the first time in his life to examine with special interest a little child. Miss Rose also scrutinized him, though with a frank unconcern that rather astonished him. Upon venturing to approach her, however, he was driven away with contumely.

"Go 'way, go 'way—naughty!" cried the little creature with the confidence of a grown person rebuking a beggar. Then she looked

at her mother with a chuckle of triumph, and both began to laugh at him openly.

"You mustn't be too easily snubbed, sir," Joyce remarked, wiping the tears from her cheeks; "for she's just such an impudent little hussy as her mother was before her."

"Perhaps she's hungry?" suggested Simon, as though struck with a bright idea. "I don't know exactly what children eat; but would some cold beef meet the case, do you think?"

"Oh yes—with plenty of pickles!" Joyce laughed again hysterically, then put up her hand with a deprecating gesture. "You must forgive me, sir; but I'm so happy that I'm forced to make game o' somebody. No, no, Mr. Simon, a child of twenty months isn't fed on beef and pickles; but happen your housekeeper would poach her an egg."

"Eggy!" shouted the child, with a wriggle of satisfaction; and Simon promptly went in search of Mrs. Venn.

When the egg arrived he expected to see it demolished in a twinkling; but he had not quite mastered the philosophy of baby-hood yet. The child was too much attracted by the pattern of the plate to pay much heed to what was upon it.

"Oh, pitty, pitty!" she kept repeating, following the lines with a tiny forefinger.

"Shall I give your egg to Mr. Secretan, then?" asked Joyce.

"Sekkitan—then," echoed Rose; then slid down to the floor and began to caress her mother with a child's bewildering irrelevance. "Oh, poor, poor!" she said, stroking Joyce's cheek. "Not w-e-ll?"

This, being her longest sentence, was repeated many times in a quaint, drawling fashion. But at length she was cozened into taking some mouthfuls of bread dipped in the egg, first insisting upon offering each one to "Sekittan—then," as she began from this moment to call Simon.

After this it was high time to play. She slid down to the floor again and began to paddle to and fro, carrying a stool about in an anxious manner, and finally depositing it on a chair and carefully covering it with her mother's shawl.

Joyce, seeing that Simon was becoming interested, and regarding the little creature as quite a new phenomenon, could allow her newly won ease of mind to spread and deepen.

"You'll find a lot of human nature wrapped up in that small parcel, Mr. Simon," she said presently. "Just put the other stool on the top of hers, now, and see how she'll take it."

Simon did so. The second stool was at once thrown down with a squeak of anger from Miss Rose. Then, as she seemed bent upon collecting all the small movable things about the room, he offered to help, and got dismissed with cries of "'Way, 'way!" for his pains.

Presently she halted before the glass door of the book-case, pointing and saying, "Pitty bookee!"

Not having the key about him, Simon offered her other books, only to be rebuffed once more.

The mother regarded the pair with eyes yearning and hopeful, and a smile of deep peace. The child, standing and pointing imperiously, looked very quaint and pretty. Her small face was upturned to the big gentleman, her bright eyes looked eagerly from under the tumbled fair curls, the short, crisp little features were alight with piquant impatience.

The new guardian was of course compelled to find the key, and next to take down one by one a whole row of Mr. Pethick's science primers. When the last one was down, she suddenly lost all her interest in books, and became athirst for fresh diversion.

Here was Simon's opportunity; and his instruction had proceeded so far that he was able to grasp it. Sitting on the floor, he invited the little one to climb upon his shoulder; and, seeing nothing new to be taken up or put down, she kindly consented.

Thereupon ensued a triumphal progress. He marched up and down the room with the child grasping his hair, and squeaking, babbling, and kicking to her heart's content. Her effervescing delight increased at every stride, and Simon felt the strange de-cynicizing charm of the child-nature working in him like an anodyne. It was a complete conquest for the time being, and one more note was thus added to the mother's content.

After this the frisky little creature was tired enough to be glad of a rest. She placed both stools by her mother's sofa, and laid a shawl across them with much careful adjustment; then sat down gingerly,

and leaned against the reclining figure, muttering sleepily, "Poor—poor, n' well!"

Joyce, after caressing the small head, and whispering endearments into the tiny ear, asked Mr. Secretan to take a seat near her, explaining that she had much to talk about, but little voice to do it with.

Then she asked him for a full account of how he had come to take another man's disgrace upon his shoulders.

As Joyce knew the truth about Clancy, the promise of silence was of course void, and Simon was free to explain the circumstances that had led up to it and for how long the compact was to last.

"I see, I see," she muttered, when he had delivered himself thus far. "You've given me only a clipped version of the affair, Mr. Simon, as I know very well; but I perceive that the whole transaction was most like you both. It was like him to work upon you when he found himself in

a hole, most like you to be cozened into a promise of such insane generosity. Your friend has wrecked you pretty thoroughly for the time being, Mr. Simon; and but for me, it's like enough you'd never float off again. There's no one but me to pick up the pieces, d'ye see?"

"How so, Joyce?"

"I'm the only livin' person as can swear to the truth about poor Mary and her lover. You'm out of court yourself, don't you see? Having acquiesced in a lie for the best part of a month, the truth wouldn't come from you with any sort o' weight; your word wouldn't overbear his in public estimation. That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"But you don't think——"

"I don't *think*, but I *know* that Mr. Terence Clancy 'll fight tooth and nail rather than confess anythin'. He meant to do so, mind you, when he made the promise. I don't say that he didn't mean what he said

at the time; but does a weak man like that ever stick to a difficult promise unless he's drove to it? You made things too easy for him, sir; you opened a gate in the hedge, and he plunged through pretty quick, and will find plenty of excuses for stayin' on the sunny side o't."

Simon sat silent and amazed at this view of the matter. The suggestion that Terence would break his word now, and turn round upon his rescuer, was too painful to be harboured.

But Joyce went quietly on as though speaking of certainties rather than probabilities.

"He will fight tooth and nail. The man who has let you bear this for a month would let you bear it all your life—or through a dozen lives, if you had 'em—rather than take it on his own shoulders. What's to hinder him—gratitude? I believe when you set him up in his profession his gratitude

took the form of robbery of your lady love. Ah, gratitude's a mighty tender plant! A child's breath will kill it. And if he shirked discovery before, how will he like it now? For, remember, now that he's once let you suffer for him, discovery would mean absolute ruin to him, with his wife, his friends, his patients, and every one else besides."

She saw that her listener writhed under her words, that the truth about Clancy was going into him like a sword. But knowing that there was no time to be lost, she was anxious to stir Simon to action.

"You had best send for a magistrate, or other competent person, to-morrow, Mr. Simon, an' I'll make oath, or affidavit, or whatever 'tis called, as to the truth o' this matter. I'd like to get it done to-morrow, for I'm growin' weaker. Fact is, you've taken a load off me, and I don't seem to care about more strugglin', and people in my state are apt to snuff out sudden-like

as soon as the call for further effort ceases. Think a minute what your position would be without my evidence to back you. In a few days' time you'd be free to tell your story, and he'd deny every word of it on his oath. Then they'd say, 'Why did you tamper with the truth? why did you let the lie bide so long?'

"There'd be not a tittle of evidence agen' him but your bare word: not one in ten would believe you. Mayhap his wife might, knowing you so well, and gettin' to know him a bit by now, I should think; and like enough you'd spoil her life—her's for whose sake you've bore this. For I know that 'tis so, though you gave me all your motives but the true un. And, lookee, sir, a vain attempt to set up your innocence would break you worse than you're broke now. Mr. Simon—I tell you this plain an' straight an' solemn as if I was in church—you must either begin the fight the moment you're free, and with

my sworn evidence to back you, or else hold your peace for ever!"

"Your supposition as to his treachery is horrible, horrible," muttered Simon. "I can't bring myself to accept it."

"Put yourself in his place, sir. You've never known what it is to have to think about daily bread; but think what professional ruin means to *him*. He may feel qualmish, but he'll fight like a wounded beast. And, upon my word, you've a'most drove him to it by givin' in to him so at the beginning. You must fetch in a parson or a magistrate to-morrow without fail. Why, sir, the more I think on't, the greater seems the crisis. What o' the hall, and the lands —your patrimony? There's no entail, is there?"

"No. But what has that to do with it?"

"Mr. Simon, I'm loth to make you bitter, but 'tis my firm belief that if you don't right yourself Sir Hamo 'll cut you out of Monks

Damerel. A better father might do it: *he* would to a certainty. Think over it all to-night. I'm a bit tired now, and my voice is goin', so I must just tell you my plans, and then get some sleep. I've one thing to confess—that I *did* rather hope to be took bad here, thinkin' so to further my Blossom's chance with you. I han't the ghost of a fear that you'll go back from your word, so I like to plump out the fraud, such as it was. As 'tis, I shan't stay here to bother you after to-morrow. I'm perfectly at ease now, and shall get myself carted over to the town, and hire a decent little room there to die in; an' I know you'll have my precious sent over to see me every day? But don't be pityin' me too much, sir, for nothin' can rob me of the peace of mind that you've given me. . . . And, sir, happen you'll be talkin' about me to her sometimes when I'm gone? Yes, yes; I know you'll do that."

"Poor—poor," murmured the baby sleepily.

"Ah, she'm half asleep already, and won't give you no more trouble. Lay her along by me, sir, would you?"

Simon did so; and the twain slept.

He then drew his chair up to the fire, and hung over it, moodily thinking. Joyce's candid speaking had produced in him a self-revelation which was now developing rapidly in the silence. For the first time since the occasion of his public arraignment he was getting a fair view of himself from the outside, and the process was one of painful disillusion.

In common with most of his father's household, he had always liked Joyce for her good heart, and respected her bright wit, audacious honesty, and pluck when in trouble. Upon the work-a-day matters of ordinary life he rightly valued her opinion a good deal above his own; hence the light that she had been shedding, even more by her tone than her words, upon his own

conduct, was causing him deep misgivings. It was clear that she considered his yielding to Terence's eloquence a piece of criminal folly. Moreover, her repeated use of the phrase, "tampering with the truth," gave him that sharpest of pangs which comes when self endorses the accusation of a friend. The words remained with him like the after-flavour of a nauseous drug. He *had* tampered with the truth—from a benevolent motive, no doubt—but tampering there had been. He had so manipulated the figure of Truth as to make it unrecognizable for a time, and then had railed at the world for passing it by unheeded. In effect he had passed an adverse verdict upon himself, and then turned savagely upon his neighbours for accepting it.

Then, again, as to Terence Clancy. His friend had always been a weak man—a "good-hearted weakling," was what Simon had often called him in his own mind, yet

had failed to realize that a good heart is not a thing to be trusted through thick and thin. How could he have been so blindly fatuous as to expect poor, feeble, shifty, well-meaning Terence to keep so difficult a promise? Confession from such a man, under such circumstances? Who but a fool would have looked for such a consummation?

The more Simon reflected, the more certain he grew that his only chance lay with this sick woman. Joyce could set him straight with the world, and her statement could be kept a secret until Clancy was fairly started in some distant place, whither the effects of past misconduct could not follow him. He now realized fully how much depended upon poor Joyce, that without her help he would never be able to right himself with his neighbours; and the possibility of having to live out his life with his name uncleared, now that he had viewed it from so near a standpoint, filled him with consternation. He felt

now that his fit of spleen against human nature was partly unreal; that he, least of all men, could afford to do without human love and respect. And perhaps he compared his own seeming-tragical woes with the long pain of this woman who complained so little. Observing her now as she slept, with both hands wrapped over her baby girl's, he guessed rightly that overwork had done much towards hastening her end, that she had worn herself down in the silent stoical endeavour, probably unmarked and unpitied of any, to support her child in comfort. Now that he was learning to observe, he could note the contrast between the threadbare clothing of the mother and the dainty attire of the baby; and the tale that hung thereby was a useful critical essay to a man whose thoughts had been concentrated upon himself for three entire weeks. Humility may be learnt rather well from a woman sometimes.

After watching her for some minutes it struck him, ignorant though he was in all matters relating to sickness, that Joyce's breathing was very faint. He wished that he had not sent Mrs. Venn to bed, or that he had himself gone for a doctor ere now.

While Simon was cogitating, however, Miss Rose awoke, and quickly showed symptoms, as far as he could judge, of being hungry. Then he looked at his watch, and was amazed to discover that it was half-past six o'clock. Evidently he must have fallen asleep by the fire, and have slept for hours.

He set the child upon his knee and gave her some milk, after which she began to patter up and down and pull things about as before.

Simon followed her in her perambulations, endeavouring to keep her quiet and away from her mother. But every now and

then she would break off, apparently when most interested, to stroke the sleeper's face with her quaint babble of "Poor—poor, not w-e-ll!" then turn to Simon with a wrinkling of the short nose, and grey eyes full of laughter.

These diversions lasted until the light of the winter morning began to steal into the homestead, and to gleam on the new coating of rime which the night had given to the great ash-trees outside. Then Miss Rose, tired of her new companion, began to cry for her mother and to pull at her hands.

Wondering how the invalid contrived to sleep through this attack, Simon bent over her with some misgiving. But she looked so placid and peaceful, so exactly as she had done when last he bent over her, that it was some minutes before the truth dawned upon him.

"Poor—poor!" cried the baby fretfully,

climbing upon the stool and stretching out her arms. But the mother would nevermore answer to that appeal. "Poor—poor" was dead.

END OF VOL. II.

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